

Big Daddy, Junior, and the Holy Spook by cheekaspbrak

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: 1990s, Alternate Universe - Boarding School, Alternate Universe - High School, Anxiety, Author Projecting Onto Eddie Kaspbrak, Beverly Marsh & Richie Tozier Are Best Friends, Beverly Marsh Lives With Her Aunt, Biblical Scripture References (Abrahamic Religions), Bullying, Catholic Guilt, Catholic School, Child Neglect, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, First Kiss, I have a good reason I swear, Internalized Homophobia, Lonely Richie Tozier, M/M, Period-Typical Homophobia, Richie Tozier Has ADHD, Richie Tozier's Trashmouth, Richie's parents love him it's just complicated, School Dances, Sexual Harassment, Sharing a Bed, Sneaking Out, Soft Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak's A+ Parenting, Stan's still Jewish even if this is a Catholic school, Vomiting, bear with me, tags and rating are subject to change bc idk what im doing, this is largely based off of my own experience with religion

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Summary:

“When was your first day?” He asks, unsure if that is an appropriate question to ask. Several moments slide by before Richie moves to take his glasses off and set them on his nightstand. He closes his eyes once they are off like there's no point in trying to see anything

without them.

“Fourth grade,” Richie answers quietly.

“Fourth grade?” Eddie repeats incredulously, amazed that anyone could send their kid off to boarding school so young. For a moment, he tries to imagine what little 9-year-old Richie would look like, tiny suitcase in hand as he waved goodbye to his parents. Maybe he even cried after lights out. Eddie frowns against his pillow.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This is very loosely based off of *A Separate Peace*, excluding all the 'trying to murder your best friend' shit because I can only handle so much angst.

Little Eddie Kaspbrak went to church every Sunday with his mommy, never missing a service because it would 'send his soul straight to hell', or so he heard. It was a nice Catholic church with a tight-knit community and big, stained-glass windows that always made it feel like it must be summer outside, even when the snow or rain was coming down. For years, it felt like home and love and a sense of belonging, his favorite place that all of his friends were at where they'd all press side-to-side and listen to the lovely Bible verses that commanded them to love their neighbors and forgive others. Endless, unconditional love flowed from his church in the same way it did from his mother, but the magic of it all faded away in sync with the realization that his mother wasn't all she made herself out to be. His mother was big and warm and took care of him when he was sick, which was more often than any other kid was sick. With age comes wisdom, and as Eddie grew he came to understand that his *mother* was the sick one, sick in the head with a hypochondriac paranoia that urged her to keep her son pressed firmly under her thumb, away from all the dirt and pain of the world, away from all things that caused cancer and illness because that was what she had lost Frank Kaspbrak to and she'd be damned if it happened again. Squished under her thumb Little Eddie wriggled, rebelled in whatever way he could afford without her putting him in lockdown mode, and carried on with his miserable existence. The church became a safe haven more than ever before, a place where people asked after your wellbeing in a way that wasn't suffocating, a place where love was unconditional and didn't come with a price. Or so Eddie thought. One sermon would change his mind.

"Today, many children who previously attended our Youth Group on Sundays have come of the proper age to join us in the adult sermons," The priest had begun, looking around at all the new faces

joining them. Eddie was one of the kids who had just turned twelve, which was the age that they were kicked out of their tight-knit, loving youth group and sent to the adult church to sit among their parents and listen to their boring stories, “Twelve is the age when you children will start to explore the adult world, you will start to learn more about yourselves, about your parents and friends. You may distance yourselves from God, perhaps. It happens to the best of us,” At this, there was a murmur through the audience before him, “It’s okay. He will guide your way back to Him, I assure you. But, I wanted to point out some important verses in the Holy Scripture as you leap towards your teenage years. The first one is this, Exodus 20:12,” Pages flipped as the church tried to find the verse he named.

“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you,” The priest read it out, and the audience hummed in agreement. Sonia Kaspbrak looked at him pointedly, and Eddie got the message, “The second is Leviticus 18:22, ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination,’” Another hum came from the crowd, but Eddie just furrowed his eyebrows down at the page, confused. It didn’t matter that he did not understand, however, because the priest continued on, “There will be temptations in your teenage years, and this may be one of them. Don’t allow yourself to be tempted, because if you commit this abominable sin, your soul will be tainted, and God will be unable to accept you into the gates of Heaven.”

He may have continued on speaking, or even done a breakdance next for all Eddie knew. He was no longer paying attention, numb in his seat and trying to search for another one of the children from his youth group, to see what they thought. For twelve years, he’d been told that God’s love is unconditional, eternal, and forgiving. He was never told that he would not be allowed into Heaven, or that he’d be sent to Hell if he did something wrong. What the sin was that the Priest named, Eddie did not know. To him, it sounded like he wasn’t allowed to lie down next to another boy, but that couldn’t make sense, could it? He wouldn’t be sent to Hell for lying down next to another boy, right? He’d shared beds with his cousin Jimmy, was his fate forever determined because of that? What had happened to the benevolent God he’d been raised to believe in, and why was He now being replaced with fear and wrath?

His mother shifted on the pew next to him, the old wooden slats creaking loudly as she moved. His gaze flitted over to her, receiving a stern glare and a pointed finger at the Priest. His head snapped into position so fast it could have almost rolled right off his neck. The fear that she was watching him kept his head rigidly stationed right at the Priest, and it was then that he realized that God was really just a larger, omnipotent version of Sonia Kaspbrak.

Eddie continued to go to church with his mommy, but the connection was no longer there. The love he had once possessed for his religion faded away like everything else good and pure does in early adolescence. And over time, his mother noticed more and more his lack of attention to the priest's words, his lack of prayer and reading scripture, and she began to crack down. Bible study became a necessity every Wednesday, prayer was something they did by their bedside- just like in the movies- every night before they slept, and eventually, when all hope seemed lost, she heard about St. Anthony's Boarding School for young boys in high school the summer after Eddie's sophomore year. Though applications were technically closed, every staff member at St. Anthony's agreed that there was no way they could let a sweet, well-behaved young boy like Eddie Kaspbrak slip away, so he was given the special opportunity to apply a month late, pleasing Sonia endlessly.

Of course, she was worried about how her little boy would do in a big boarding school, but he was smart and well-adjusted and promised to call her often. There were many nagging thoughts that he could get hurt or wind up in a group of the more dangerous, rebellious boys at Saint Anthony's, but Eddie reassured her over and over that there was nothing to be worried about, and so Sonia finally let go.

Eddie, of course, was terrified of life all on his own. The staff of St. Anthony's were all incredibly welcoming, and the school was clean and pretty, but Eddie had done almost nothing on his own, relying on his mother for help through nearly every obstacle in his life. Illness, homework, and big life decisions were always assisted by his mother, so intense it was nearly suffocating. Now that it would be gone save for the weekly phone call, Eddie didn't know who he was on his

own.

He was going to build himself from scratch, brick by brick, at only sixteen years old. And Sonia would have no say in it at all, which was equally as exciting as it was absolutely terrifying.

Even more terrifying is the state of his room when he enters it, even though it is only the first day. It's a tight little room, reminiscent of the double rooms at a Boy Scout camp (if Eddie had ever been allowed to go to one), and there is a bed on either side of the room with two nightstands in between. A large window takes over the wall the beds and nightstands rest against, the morning sun illuminating the desk just past the foot of the bed, pressed against the wall on the right. The room is completely undecorated, a brown carpet covering the floor and stark white walls all around, completely barren and unwelcoming. The worst part of it all, though, is that his roommate had clearly arrived before he had, and had promptly dumped his things all over the bed next to the desk. Clothes, a clutter of papers, shoes, and a poorly hidden pack of cigarettes litter the bedspread, completely unkempt with seemingly no intention of becoming organized in the near future. Eddie is horrified, to say the least.

For several minutes he stands there imagining all the passive-aggressive, or just plain aggressive things he could say to his roommate when he first meets him. Most of them have the word 'fuck' in them, which Eddie knows is likely frowned upon at a Catholic school. A pang of something akin to claustrophobia strikes through his heart, imagining the strict rules and bedtimes and watchful eye of the staff. Though he came from a pretty strict household to begin with, Sonia is his *mother*, and she is allowed to tell him what to do. Some random adults who probably drink their asses off on the weekends are not his mother and the thought of being told what to do by them makes him feel like he's choking.

A puff of his inhaler helps rid his lungs of the imaginary hand wrapping around his throat, icy claws digging into his jugular.

"Aw, man. Tozier got stuck with the sick kid! Serves 'im right!" Someone cries from out in the hallway, several boys passing by in a blur so Eddie can't catch sight of any of their faces. He looks down at his hands that are still clutching the Ziploc bag stuffed full of bottles

of pills his mother had given him. He flushes bright red, embarrassed that people have already taken notice of his sickly condition- though he knows none of it is real, the other kids don't know that and will tease him relentlessly for it, as he had learned in the past few years of high school. In a flash of anger and humiliation, he takes the bag and pushes it into the tiny, beige trash can in the corner of the room urgently.

"Hey, man. What kind of pills are those? If it's Addy, you could sell those for like, ten a pop around here," Eddie's eyebrows shoot through the roof at the offensively loud voice behind him. He whirls around on his heels, nearly knocking himself over in his haste.

"Keep your voice down! Are you trying to get me in trouble on the first day? I'm not some fucking drug dealer," The words all come out in a rush at the boy towering over him, at least a half a foot taller than Eddie, if not more. He is nearly chest to chest with Eddie (or face to chest), so close that he has to take a step back so they can both get a good look at each other. Eddie is met with a mess of curly hair, ridiculously magnified glasses, wrinkled clothing, and a grin that stretches so wide he is surprised it doesn't split his cheeks.

"Gee-sus, kid!" The boy crows, as loudly as he'd spoken when he first walked in. He looks up towards the ceiling, "Sorry Poppy, I shouldn't be taking the Lord's name in vain, and whatnot," His fingers form the sign of the cross and his gaze goes back to Eddie, "Anywho, I'm Richie, your roommate!"

The vice is back around his throat, and Eddie puffs off his inhaler again. Richie's eyes widen with curiosity, even rounder behind the magnification of his glasses, "I'm Eddie," He answers once his breathing is evened out, "Clean up your shit."

Without the size of his staring eyes lessening, Richie turns to look at the pile of stuff spread across his bed, "It's my room, too," He grumbles, crossing the room and collapsing down on top of all his clothes and junk, "I'm not about to be told what to do by some Freshman."

And if Eddie wasn't pissed before, he sure is now. His head snaps so quickly in Richie's direction it nearly sounds like a crack of thunder,

“I’m a Junior, you asshole, and I don’t want to have to live in a gross room the whole time I’m here! It’s not my fault you decided to dump out your whole suitcase on the bed instead of unpacking like a sane person.”

With a huff, Eddie turns to his own suitcase and begins unpacking his clothes into the dresser that is tucked away in the closet at the foot of his bed. As he goes about his business, Richie grumbles something snarky from his spot on his bed, so quiet that Eddie couldn’t hear it. He pops his head out of the door of the closet, knowing the look on his face is scary enough to make the little shit wet his pants, “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I said,” Richie rolls his eyes, not meeting Eddie’s but instead looking straight up at the popcorn ceiling, “I didn’t come with a suitcase, so it’s not my fault I had to leave my stuff in a pile on the bed.”

And well, Eddie had no idea what to say to that. He pauses in the closet doorway, staring blankly at the gangly pile of limbs and clothing. Why wouldn’t he have brought a suitcase? It’s an expensive boarding school, unless he had come here on a scholarship that Eddie is certain Richie didn’t have the intelligence or responsibility to earn, so why wouldn’t his parents be able to buy him a suitcase?

Eddie stares down at his uniform loafers and slacks, much more crisp and ironed than Richie’s, and decides that making enemies with his roommate is not the best course of action for his first year at a boarding school.

“I can fold all of your clothes if you want? I’m pretty good at it. Well, better than most teenage boys are, anyway,” He offers a smile at Richie who had torn his eyes away from the ceiling to dance over Eddie’s face with interest, head lolled sideways onto his shoulder, “Just this once, though. I’m not going to be your laundry bitch for the rest of the year.”

Richie’s face is pensive for several moments before it cracks into that cheek-splitting smile once again, “Thanks, Eds! I promise I won’t tell any of the shitheads out there about your special laundry skill, ‘cause they’ll try to bully you into doing theirs, too.”

Crossing the room to pick up Richie's clothes, Eddie puffs out a sigh of annoyance, "That is *not* my name, Dickie. My name is Eddie."

"Hey!" Richie whines in response, "Dickie is not a very nice name, Eds!"

He tosses his lanky body around on the bed, rolling over to his stomach so his head points towards the closet door Eddie turned and disappeared into.

"Neither is Eds, Dickie."

The thing about switching schools two years into high school is that everyone already has their friend group picked out with no room for new kids. Which really is only a problem once lunchtime comes around because nobody wants to be the kid sitting alone in the cafeteria. As Eddie makes his way through the lunchline it seems more and more like he will definitely wind up being the kid sitting alone, as no one looks friendly enough to sit with, and of course, he hasn't met a single student aside from his obnoxious roommate. Perhaps tomorrow, when classes begin, he'll meet a few more students to befriend, but for now, he's lost in a sea of white button-ups and navy blue slacks.

The lunches are divided up by year, with about a hundred kids per lunch, and they all swarm around the tables like ants. As Eddie steps out of the lunchline with his tray, his eyes dart around, looking for a friendly face or, at the very least, an empty table. Before he can find one, though, a head of curly hair catches his eye. This time, the nest of curls he spies aren't charcoal black, but instead a dirty blonde or light brown. It is attached to a pair of eyes that regard him with interest, and the second he catches Eddie's gaze he waves at him kindly. Without another thought, Eddie moves in the direction of the table.

"Are you new?" The kid asks, sitting next to another boy, dark-skinned and handsome.

Eddie nods, smiling at them both, "I am. Thanks for waving me over,

it's awful being new when everyone already knows each other. I'm Eddie."

"I can imagine," He answers, "I'm Stan, and this is Mike. We have a few more friends who sit with us, but they're not here yet."

Eddie slides onto the bench opposite of them, setting his tray of chicken alfredo in front of him. Stan and Mike proceed to explain little things about the school system that they deem important for a newcomer to know, such as the morning bells are at 7 AM on weekdays and 9 AM on weekends, or that Mr. Bitters is the worst teacher to have Junior year. Just as they wrap up their little welcome speech, two more boys join them at their table. One is Ben, a tall boy still clinging to bits of baby fat, and the other is Bill, handsome with auburn hair and a steady gaze that makes Eddie feel anxious. All of the boys seem nice enough, asking Eddie lots of questions about his family and life beyond boarding school.

"Did you chuh-choose to go to boar-boarding school, or did yuh-your parents make you?" Bill asks him with a stutter he had explained he was going to speech therapy for. Occasionally he would mutter a word he was struggling with in French, instead. It's an interesting tactic he had learned in therapy that made him sound like a foreign exchange student when he said *école* or something under his breath.

"My mom made me. Honestly, I'm surprised it was her idea. She's kind of a... helicopter mom, you know? So, it was surprising that she wanted to send me away, but here I am," Eddie says with a shrug, picking at his noodles. His eyes wander around the busy lunchroom, amazed at how boring it all looked when everyone was wearing the same clothing. He misses the contrasting gothic and valley girl styles of the lunchroom at his old school, the boys in athletic gear or leather jackets. It is all just a mass of white, navy, and black now.

With a start, his eyes land on the most easily identifiable person in the lunchroom- his roommate. Richie's big glasses and wild hair make him stick out like a sore thumb- that, and the fact that he is sitting by himself at a completely empty table. Eddie's face contorts into confusion; Richie is annoying, sure, but he's loud and clearly social, so why would he be sitting entirely alone?

“Hey,” Eddie interrupts the conversation at hand suddenly, quickly followed up with an apology, “Do you guys know him?” He uses his fork to point in the direction of Richie who’s back is mostly turned to them. All of their heads quickly follow his fork and he is very thankful Richie wasn’t looking at them because they are terrible at being subtle.

“Oh, that’s Richie Tozier,” Mike answers.

“Yeah, I know that. He’s my roommate. He’s not new, right? So why’s he sitting alone?” Eddie can’t tear his eyes away, watching him sadly pick at his food.

“No, he’s been in boarding school for a *long* time,” Ben pipes up, “He went to St. Joseph’s Middle School, from what I’ve heard. He might have even been in St. Catherine’s before that, so he’s been in the boarding school system for longer than any of us. But, he’s been sitting alone as long as I can remember, I guess he’s just a loner.”

“A loner?” Stan scoffs, throwing his eyes back in the direction of Richie before lowering his voice and leaning close to Eddie, “He’s just... weird. I’m pretty sure he thinks he’s a comedian, but nobody else thinks he’s funny. His jokes are raunchy and borderline mean,” He concludes, and only Bill nods in agreement. Eddie watches Ben give a sympathetic glance at Richie’s turned back.

“I don’t know, I think he’s just one of those guys who never learned when to stop talking. He’s always been nice to me,” Ben says.

“Well, of course. The meanest person in the world couldn’t be mean to you, Ben,” Mike nudges Ben with his elbow, a big smile on his face. Ben rolls his eyes but the blush on his face makes it evident that he liked the compliment, and from what Eddie could tell it is true, Ben is probably the sweetest person he’s ever met. The boys all continue on with the conversation, and Eddie joins in when he can, but he finds his eyes continually wandering back over to Richie, poking at his food and stubbornly refusing to remove his focus away from his plate.

As the sun settles down under the horizon, it becomes more and more difficult for Eddie to breathe. It feels almost like his brain was unplugged from his body, like he is numb all over except for the nagging tightness in his chest. He wasn't allowed to go to Boy Scout camp or have sleepovers, so he had never spent a night in a home that didn't have his mother in it, *ever*. What will he do if he comes down with a cold in the middle of the night? What if he has a nightmare?

Richie isn't in the room yet, and Eddie spares a quick glance around the room before snatching the discarded bag of medicine back out of the trash can. Just as he does so, Richie enters the room, *of course*.

"You know that's a trash can, right? Not a storage bin," Richie twirls a key ring around his finger as he makes his way past Eddie to the bed. He has his used uniform tucked under his arm, hair freshly wet from his shower. Eddie had showered that morning before he arrived at the school, so he opted out of traversing through the daunting bathrooms on his first day. The bedclothes Richie has changed into are black gym shorts and a *Tom and Jerry* shirt. He looked out of place before, with his wrinkled uniform and untucked shirt, but now, among all the other boys in the hall dressed in flannel pajama sets, he looks even more out of place.

"Shut up," Is all Eddie could conjure up in response, wearing green flannel pajamas himself. The sun had entirely set hours prior, the room only dimly lit by the lamps on each of their nightstands. As Eddie goes to sit down on his bed, he watches Richie drop his dirty clothes onto the floor, "Come on, the hamper is right next to the door!"

Richie shoots a dark look at him that shuts Eddie up immediately. He looks leagues different from the Richie he had been speaking with that morning. His stupid grin is replaced with a defeated expression, one that doesn't change even as he walks across the room to put his clothes in the hamper, "There, are you happy?" What could have possibly gone wrong in the bathroom to make him so sour?

"Thank you," Eddie replies meekly. A question lingers on his tongue for a while, thick and bitter, choking him. Shaky hands bring his inhaler up to his lips.

"Why do you use that so much?" Richie seems grateful for the sudden distraction, the tension in his shoulders easing up. He crosses the room once more and lays down on his own bed, "You got allergies or somethin'?"

Eddie shakes his head, still perched on the edge of his mattress, "Not exactly. It's uh," He sends a pointed look over to Richie, "Don't laugh. Anxiety triggers my asthma, so I, uh, I've needed to use it a lot today."

"Oh," Richie says. Something like guilt passes over his face, "Well, don't worry about it, everybody gets stressed on their first day," He shrugs it off, rolling onto his stomach and tucking his pillow under his head. Eddie mimicks him.

"When was your first day?" He asks, unsure if that is an appropriate question to ask. Several moments slide by before Richie moves to take his glasses off and set them on his nightstand. He closes his eyes once they are off like there's no point in trying to see anything without them. Eddie wonders just how poor his eyesight is.

"Fourth grade," Richie answers quietly, "So you could say I'm a pro. If boarding school was a sport, I'd be Bo Jackson," He opens his eyes as he laughs at his own reference and Eddie is suddenly aware of how different he looks without the magnifying lenses. It isn't a big difference, necessarily, but he looks less like George McFly, softer around the edges with fluttering eyelashes.

"*Fourth grade?*" Eddie repeats incredulously, amazed that anyone could send their kid off to boarding school so young. For a moment, he tries to imagine what little 9-year-old Richie would look like, tiny suitcase in hand as he waved goodbye to his parents. Maybe he even cried after lights out. Eddie frowns against his pillow.

"It's not so bad, growing up in boarding school," Richie says, sounding like he's lying through his teeth, "It gives you a sense of freedom."

"What about all the adults threatening to expel you if you do anything wrong?" Eddie asks genuinely, more afraid of their wrath than anything else.

“Don’t do anything wrong and you’ll be fine. You’re the perfect little uptight Catholic schoolboy. They’ll love you,” Richie yawns against his pillow just as someone passes by the door hollering ‘lights out!’, “That’s our cue, kiddo,” He says, reaching over to flick off the lamp. Eddie does the same, opting not to argue with him about the truth of the descriptor ‘uptight’. The darkness floods throughout the room, only the hall light seeping in from the crack under the door. He hears Richie roll over in his bed, and the fear of being alone grips around his throat once more. He wouldn’t dare use his inhaler and interrupt Richie drifting off to sleep, so he sits there motionless, with his eyes peering up at the ceiling. Hours must pass by, or perhaps it was only thirty minutes, but he still can’t force his eyes shut. As time slides by, the panic eases away, but he still can’t bring himself to drift into slumber.

Just as he is about to shift his position in his bed, he hears a small squeak from Richie’s side of the room. For a paranoid moment, Eddie fears there are mice in their dorm room, but those thoughts are harshly cut off by a little cry followed by a snuffle. With a start, Eddie realizes that Richie is *crying*. Why is he crying?

The wet snuffles continue and Eddie remains frozen in place. Should he say something? Would Richie be mad if he said something? As he lays there pondering his options, he feels the fuzzy edges of sleep close in on him, and he would be ashamed to admit that he fell asleep to the sounds of Richie’s sniffling without checking to make sure he was alright.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

oof this chapter hit home, especially the last bit.
anyway, just a warning there is a lot of talk about
nervous puking, as well as some 'minor' sexual
harassment.

Each year, the first day of school grows worse and worse. Returning to a place where he *knows* he isn't welcome makes Richie feel like just sleeping all day, never waking up again for anything- not the morning bell, not the sound of Eddie scuffling around in the room, and not the banging of the RA on the door because 'fucking Tozier is *still* asleep, what a prick'. Glumly, Richie finally pushes himself out of bed, because as much as he wants to he can't sleep through the rest of his life.

"I'm up," He tells the RA at the door, rubbing at his blurry eyes and popping his glasses onto his face. Eddie is already gone, maybe he wanted to get to the cafeteria early, or maybe he needed to take a shower after skipping out last night.

"Tozier, I am *not* dealing with this shit this year. Wake up on time or get expelled," The voice grows quieter as it pulls back from the door, heading down the hall to deal with some other crisis probably happening. The first day of school is always filled to the brim with crises. Richie just hopes he will narrowly avoid most of them. He has enough to deal with already.

Every bone in his body protests as he goes to stand. Those gangly limbs of his are creaky despite only being sixteen years old, and they burn and pop and protest like they have a good reason to, though Richie has hardly put them to much use aside from reaching up to high shelves and occasionally doing one push-up before giving up. His eyes protest too, but that is because he had put them to *too much* use last night, use that he really hopes his roommate hadn't overheard. Though, he is rather impressed with Eddie's own lack of crying, because in his lengthy experience at boarding schools, almost everyone cries on their first night. As far as Richie knows- and he'd

been awake most of the night- Eddie hadn't made a peep.

Truly, he doesn't know what to think of his new roommate. He's known him for a little less than 24 hours at this point, so he can't pass any permanent judgment, but the kid just seems like a pain in the ass. The short brunet had revealed himself to be a snippy, bossy little schoolboy in only a few hours. Richie knows he will have no trouble blending right in with the rest of the school- all equally uptight, bossy schoolboys who hate Richie with a passion. Well, *hate* is a strong word, but none of them particularly *like* Riche. And that's fine, Richie doesn't really want a bunch of snooty shitsheads to like him anyway.

No, he just needs to deal with this awful school for only two more years, and then he's free to do whatever he wants. He can head off to college, one where RAs and Deans aren't watching him every second, and get a degree in something like quantum physics- because quantum physics is amazing and Catholic school is almost always lacking in their science curriculum. Whatever it is Richie will do when he graduates, it is going to be a lot more fun than prancing around in slacks and loafers, sitting alone at lunch tables, and being sent to Saturday afternoon detention just for a stupid joke.

But for now, he has to trudge through the hallways, being scolded left and right for his wrinkled uniform and watching his classmates snicker and point. He often likes to toss the phrase 'take a picture sweetheart, it'll last longer!' on occasion, but he mostly just keeps his head down. Most of his problems come during class, anyway.

Classes are *boring*. They're aggravating and monotonous and if there was an adult in Richie Tozier's world that actually gave a damn, he might have learned a long time ago that he's struggling with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. But no, none of the adults in his family or at his school see anything beyond an undisciplined child, and in turn, Richie sees nothing in himself but a broken brain he can't *quite* make work.

And at the top of the totem pole of adults that *really* can't stand Richie Tozier is Michael Bitters. Mr. Bitters is an angry, short man whose hair grows exclusively on his upper lip and absolutely nowhere else. His eyes are little dashes behind his wire glasses due to

his continuous glare, but there is a special look he has saved for Richie when he's in a particularly bad mood.

He's always in a bad mood on the first day of the semester. And, of course, he is Richie's third-period teacher, just before lunch, when Richie starts to get especially antsy.

Still, Richie tries. He takes his seat in the back of the room, sits straight forward without looking around, and manages to actually listen to the monotonous information poured forth from Mr. Bitters' mouth. Ten minutes in, when a pencil pokes the back of Richie's left shoulder, his efforts go out the window.

"Hey, could you quit shaking your leg like that? It's distracting," A harsh whisper cuts through the silence in the classroom, quiet enough to not gain Bitters' attention.

Leaning forward, Richie throws his head over his shoulder to get a good look at his newfound distraction, discovering it to be none other than his roomie, giving him one of his signature- as Richie is coming to learn- death glares. His fingers grip the edge of the honey-colored wood desk, pencil he used to poke Richie in hand. His lips pucker into what would have resembled a kiss if it wasn't for the furrowed eyebrows and menacing look in his eye.

"It helps me focus," Richie says, and he doesn't know why, but it's true. Very few things help Richie keep his attention on a subject, and shaking his leg or clicking his pen is one of them. He'd discovered over time that clicking his pen was more likely to receive threats or get him thrown out of class, so he sticks with leg-shaking.

"Well, it keeps *me* from focusing," Eddie answers, annoyed expression unwavering. If he thinks he is intimidating, he's dead wrong. He is, in every sense of the word, petite. His lips are thin and pink, adorned with a tiny nose and little dots of freckles. Even though he is slender, he's only about 5'7" which is an entire half of a foot shorter than Richie himself. There is absolutely nothing intimidating about him, not yet, at least. Richie has yet to see him *really* riled up.

"Well, sweetheart, I don't really care what-"

“Mr. Tozier!” Calls Mr. Bitters from the front of the classroom. Richie sullenly turns around, looking at the man over the tops of his frames, because he isn’t as scary when he is blurred by Richie’s poor eyesight, “I am so tired of your shenanigans, Richard. Please, do yourself a favor and grow up. When you’re in college Professors will ask you to leave the classroom after the first peep you make.”

Richie wants to protest that that is likely not true, and also remind him that he had sent Richie out of his classroom without a second chance many times, but instead he figures he shouldn’t press his luck. Ignoring the burning of his cheeks and the snickering of other boys in the room, he nods and sinks into his chair, biting away any snarky remarks or jokes.

He stops shaking his leg and resorts to drawing caricatures on his paper, tuning out the rest of the lesson.

Richie genuinely wants to flip the bird at anyone who has ever judged him for sitting alone at lunch. Almost everyone at this school has watched him sit alone by himself for two years, and then there was a handful who had been watching since middle school. He isn’t a dumbass, he sees the way they look at him and laugh. Even then, if he didn’t notice those things, there are the little sharpie scribbles on his locker saying ‘Loner Loser’, but no one ever seems to get in trouble for those. Richie is surprised that the faculty didn’t pin it on Richie, himself, just for fun.

It isn’t that he necessarily *wants* to sit alone, no. In fact, he’d spent the first month of Freshman year convinced that high school was a fresh start. Thinking about the first half of that year makes him nauseous, so nauseous, in fact, he threw up from nerves a number of times during the second half of Freshman year. You see, it had gone something like this:

Step 1: Befriend a group of boys who seem nice enough.

Step 2: Get to know them and discover you really like them.

Step 3: Develop a crush on one of them- the pretty one named Connor with blond curly hair and blue eyes who laughs at your jokes.

Step 4: Watch the whole friend group start to get sick of you and your jokes and incessant rambling.

Step 5: Patrick Hockstetter catches onto your crush on Connor and mentions it to them just to fuck with you for no good reason.

Step 6: Go to sit with them the next day and watch in horror as they all get up in unison- in front of the whole fucking cafeteria- and move to another table without you.

And that was how Richie realized he preferred spending his time alone at shitty boarding schools filled to the brim with hate and judgment and fear. He isn't sure if anyone even knows the real reason his entire friend group had abandoned him within a matter of months, and if they did- if they even knew that it is, in fact, true: Richie Tozier is a queer.

That's what his father always called it, 'queerness' or 'a queer'. Richie grew up hearing his father talk like that for so long that he knew a queer was a dreadfully horrid thing to be before he even knew how to say his ABCs.

So, Richie vomited his nerves into the toilet nearly every day after every meal for a whole semester before he got his shit together. He grew so skinny that his grandmother insisted on his plate being filled three-quarters of the way with meat for every dinner that he had at her house the summer following that semester. That had considerably fattened him up, added to the fact that when he was in the comfort of his grandmother's house- the home of the only person to truly love him- he didn't feel the need to upchuck every single day.

After that summer, he went back to boarding school and vowed to never let his thoughts dwell on that subject too long. He convinced himself that eating alone was something he enjoyed doing. He convinced himself that Connor didn't still watch him from across the cafeteria like he might *catch* his queerness from all the way over there. He convinced himself well enough that he stopped rushing to

the bathroom after every meal.

He convinced himself that watching Eddie laughing with new friends on only his *second* lunch didn't put a crack through his heart, because why can't he have that? Why couldn't he have been born with a different brain and better social skills and *anything* but being a queer?

And then, Eddie throws his head back with a big burst of laughter and Richie has to tear his eyes away from how pretty his jawline looks like that because that is his shitty *roommate* and thoughts like that just *can't* happen.

They can't.

St. Anthony's is one of the oldest boarding schools in the country, meaning most of their facilities are beautiful but run-down, like the old piping in the toilets and the shallow divots carved into the marble stairs by hundreds of feet stepping on them over thousands of days. When it was created, privacy in the showers wasn't a necessity. More modern schools were built with private stalls in the showers, curtains drawn over the front. St. Anthony's, though, is old-school, with communal showers and absolutely no privacy. Richie absolutely detests it.

When he was a doe-eyed little Freshman, he'd showered in the morning like almost everyone else. He watched in awe at the upper classmen's bravery as they stripped down in front of everyone and got right to business. His previous elementary and middle schools had also had private showers, and showing his body to everyone he went to school with just didn't feel right. When the only other option is taking a wet washcloth into the bathroom stall, though, you get used to it. Plus, showering at night helped earn some privacy back.

For the last two years, it had worked spectacularly well, until-

"Thought I told you to stop coming in here, Tozier."

Richie would be embarrassed to admit he nearly jumps ten feet in the

air at the sound of Patrick Hockstetter's voice. Luckily, he hasn't stripped out of his boxers quite yet, so he is standing in rubber flip-flops and plaid boxers with his face about five inches away from Patrick. Patrick, on the other hand, is shirtless, only a towel wrapped around his waist. It isn't an ideal situation, to say the least.

"I have to shower or students will start sending complaints to the faculty. A day or two without showering and I turn into Pig-Pen," Richie takes his glasses off of his face and tucks them into the small, waterproof bag he brought with him, just in case Patrick tries anything stupid.

"I don't give a shit, Tozier," He states eloquently, hand pressing against the tiled wall and black hair hanging over his face. The school faculty daydreams about taking shears to his hair, surely, writing him up for it at least three times a semester, "I just want to shower without some pervert watching me."

As if to purposefully contradict his statement, Patrick looks Richie up and down with a carnal grin on his face that makes Richie's skin crawl. Richie would like to believe that he calls every kid he picks on 'fairies' or 'fags' or 'girly-boys' but he knows the truth, he knows that somehow high school bullies pinpoint people like him with disturbing accuracy. And though he would vehemently deny it, he knows Patrick is right.

No, he doesn't stare at the boys in the shower, at least, not below the belt. He isn't *that* messed up. But, more often than not, he finds himself tracing over the expanse of their broad shoulders and wet chests with his eyes. The first time he'd caught himself doing it, he'd become so sick to his stomach that he threw up in the bathroom for fifteen minutes, crying silently over the bowl with the onerous realization that something was deeply wrong with him. To make it all worse, his wandering eyes were as uncontrollable as his restless legs, and the other boys had started to catch on. Showering at night is simply safer.

"Fuck off, Hockstetter. Stop using me to act out your fucked up fantasies," He says, but there's not much bite to it. Last night, when Patrick had started pestering him, he'd managed to force him away long enough to shower and get back to his room in one piece. If this

continues, though, there's no telling what Patrick will do. In the past there had been incidences of loogies and broken frames and black eyes, but the lewd stares were the most concerning of it all. Patrick seems to think his interest is perceived as merely another bullying tactic, a game of chicken, perhaps. But Richie sees through it, he knows that boys don't pretend to be sexually attracted to other boys as a joke for that long and that well. It doesn't matter, anyway. If Patrick was the only gay man on earth Richie would never shack up with him, ever.

"I know you can't tear your eyes away, you sick freak," Suddenly Patrick surges forward, as far as he can get without them touching, and Richie smacks his head harshly against the wall in an attempt to keep some space between them. Again, as though to contradict himself, it is Patrick whose eyes bore into Richie's. Certainly Richie's own are scrunched up in fear, fear he wishes he didn't show so visibly because it only seems to spur him on. A drop of water from the wall connects to the skin on Richie's back, sliding down eerily, making him shiver.

"You wish. You're the one cornering me in the shower half-naked. This what you dream about at night, huh?" Richie's words seem to catch him off guard, as though he hadn't considered just how sexual the scenario was. He blinks, dumb smirk dropping down the drain allowing just enough time for Richie to snatch up his bag and clothes and race down the hallway in nothing but his boxers without showering. Wolf whistles come from multiple boys with one shouting 'Streak, Tozier, Streak!', but he just pushes by them, fumbling to get into his room before slamming the door behind him.

His thin frame presses against the wooden door and he squeezes his eyes shut tight, panting heavily and shuddering with every breath. Though he is good at keeping a brave face, Hockstetter is utterly terrifying, he's a wild card- one step away from committing a murderous or violent act. If there is anyone he would take his urges out on, it would be Richie.

"I'm not sure if I should ask if you're okay or why you're not wearing pants first."

Richie's eyes snap open, peering over at Eddie who is leaning against

the headboard with a book in his lap. It's almost lights out by now, surely, with the little lamp casting pretty golden hues all over Eddie's face. For once, his expression isn't irritated or angry, rather it is curious and a little embarrassed. With a start, Richie uses the uniform shirt in his grasp to cover his boxers- like that will help the situation at all.

"This, dear Edward, is called the walk of shame. You see, son, when you find a woman incredibly hot and she invites you over-"

"We go to an all-boys school. Even if there *were* girls here, I doubt any of them would willingly sleep with you," Eddie sits up straight then, the cloth of his pajamas and lack of annoyance making him look softer than before, "Seriously, what happened?"

"You're forgetting about all the female teachers, Eds," Richie responds with a wink, ignoring Eddie's protest of the nickname as he goes to put on his cotton bed shorts.

"Fine, don't tell me what happened. I just realized I don't care anyway," For someone who really doesn't care, Eddie is certainly keeping a watchful eye on Richie as he pulls his shirt over his head. He can feel those brown eyes that make him look significantly younger than he is burning holes into his head, "You didn't even shower, did you? That's gross."

Richie tosses his clothes over towards the hamper, whirling around the room and collapsing onto his bed with a sigh. Why couldn't Eddie just pretend he is invisible like his last roommate did? It's easier when people don't ask questions.

"Where are your glasses?" Eddie's voice cuts through the silence once more and Richie groans aloud this time.

"Why do you ask so many questions?" He says, instantly regretting when he sees the fuzzy figure of Eddie shrink back against his pillow, "I'm sorry. I think they're in my bag."

He sits up to get them, but Eddie beats him to it, tossing the frames his way, "It's okay. First days suck," He says wisely, then, once Richie put his glasses on, he continues, "I'm sorry I got you in trouble

earlier.”

Richie blinks at him several times in confusion; he had completely forgotten about that morning. Who knew Eddie had it in him to apologize? This little ticking time bomb is full of surprises, “Oh, don’t worry about it. Bitters has it out for me, it was bound to happen eventually.”

The two of them settle onto their individual beds, the hum of the busy hallway lulling Richie into a nearly catatonic state. Usually, his dorm never felt like home- even though it is a space intended to be *his own*, it never felt that way. Seven years of boarding school must be the magic number, he thinks, because it feels comforting to be back in his room despite what happened just several yards away, only a few minutes ago.

Eddie seems to finally catch onto his disinterest in talking because he flicks out the light on the dresser. Richie mimics his actions and settles down against his pillow more comfortably.

From the shine of the moon, Richie can see the glow of chapstick on Eddie’s lips. Though it’s dark, Richie can tell he is looking at him. The blue-white light strokes down the slope of his nose, makes his eyes appear glassy and almost tearful. Each individual eyelash casts shadows onto his cheeks, and his nails shine from where they clutch at the bedsheets. Richie takes a moment then and mourns the beauty of men, mourns the intricacies he will never be able to touch. The rounding of a jawline, the bumpy skin on the expanse of a shoulder, the feathering hairs on the smooth skin of a stomach. Never allowed to look, never allowed to touch. On an exhale, he tips his head back against the pillow and tries, in vain, to quiet his heavy breathing. Tears roll down the temples of his head; cursed to live a forbidden life.

“Richie,” Comes Eddie’s voice, sounding stronger in the darkness, like the anonymity makes him confident, “Try and get some rest tonight, okay?”

Richie hums, he thinks, in response. His voice can’t be trusted. It might crack from all the weight.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie's mysterious, Stan's grumpy, and Eddie just wants them all to be friends.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter took so long to force my way through, I don't know why, so sorry it took so long but here it is!

Also, I know this chapter makes it seem like Bev is going to be entirely left out, but don't worry, I have plans for her!

Eddie is genuinely blown away by the enigmatic Richie Tozier. It's not like he tries, really, to be mysterious. No one would look Richie up and down and consider him 'mysterious'. No, he wears tie-dye sweatshirts and wrinkled uniforms and he makes crude sexual jokes and shakes his leg non-fucking-stop in class. There's no teenage romcom cheesy mysteriousness, with motorcycles and leather jackets and painted black nails, but there is still some mystery there. Richie appears to be an open book, the picture of 'not giving a shit', but there are walls all around him- Eddie can feel it.

If Eddie was more than a sixteen-year-old boy equipped with absolutely no knowledge of intimacy and emotion he might know how to pry Richie open and break down those walls. But he's only human, with walls of his own, and he finds that even though he knows he should feel some sympathy for Richie and whatever inner turmoil he endures, he still gets irritated with him more often than not. He's loud and unclean, often forgetting there's a hamper for his clothes and trash can for his junk. Secretive disappearances after classes often end with Richie returning smelling like cigarette smoke, a stench Eddie hates, and he got kicked out of their shared third-period class three times within two weeks. He is a walking nightmare that Eddie can't keep himself from snapping at on occasion, and one time he even went as far as to give him the silent treatment for a full 24 hours before Richie finally apologized for snooping through

Eddie's stuff. And, even though Richie annoyed him constantly, it turned out that Eddie was a sucker for his apologies.

So, they're learning how to deal with one another, slowly but surely. Eddie's discovered he's a sucker for Richie's apologies, but it seems like Richie is a sucker for Eddie's well-rehearsed puppy-dog eyes. Though Richie doesn't know when to shut up, Eddie kind of likes listening to him ramble about his day and do funny impressions of their teachers. And Eddie has a sneaking suspicion that Richie goes out of his way to tidy up the room in between classes and his smoke breaks. They're slow learners, but they're still learning.

Not much else changes, though, over the course of the next three weeks. The weather becomes a little colder and Eddie settles into a comfortable routine. He calls his mom once a week on Wednesdays, and she always picks him up on the weekends which sucks because there are always unique school activities planned on the weekend. Bill and Ben are in a fancy film club that meets every Saturday and they peruse around the school filming different short movies. Stan is in Speech and Debate, which doesn't sound quite as fun, but Eddie still would have preferred that over long weekends at his mothers' house filled with silence and fretting over medication.

Every Sunday evening, when he returns back to his dorm, it feels like the heaviness of his mother's lingering gaze melts away, and he finds himself looking forward to seeing Richie bouncing on his toes, dancing around the room with his walkman blasting into his ears, only to drop it all when Eddie shows up and ask him a million questions about how his weekend was. Richie always spends his weekends on campus, probably getting up to no good, and Eddie wishes he could stay just to see what kind of shenanigans he usually pulls while he's gone.

As he marches up the stairs to his dorm hall with a freshly packed bag of medication clutched between his hands, he waves at Stan and Mike chatting in the hall. They're both leaning against the lockers with books tucked under their arms, so wrapped up in their conversation that they don't seem to see Eddie passing by at all. Looking down, Eddie sees that their hands are connected- only by their pinkies- but they're connected nonetheless. His eyes linger curiously on their intertwined fingers for quite some time until he

nearly runs headfirst into a wall.

Pushing open the door with a loud *thump*, Eddie peers excitedly around the room. It only takes a few moments to realize that Richie isn't there, and hasn't been for quite a while. Even with his improved efforts to keep the room clean for Eddie, there's always an empty can or stray shoe, but everything is in order- even his bed is made. He pushes aside the disappointment in his gut and decides to enjoy the time he'll have alone before Richie crawls out of whatever corner of the school he's hiding in. So, he tosses the bag of medication on the desk and flops back onto the bed, settling into the peace and quiet of his room.

He doesn't even realize he's fallen asleep until the chatter of students in the hallway grows louder and awakens him. The clock reads 6:48pm, meaning all the students are likely headed down to the dining hall for dinner. He dejectedly notes that nothing has changed in the room, no sign of Richie having shown up while he was asleep, and he makes his way down the stairs and joins his friends at the table.

"Huh-how was your weekend, Ed-Eddie?" Bill asks as soon as they're all settled in. Eddie is eating the same chicken alfredo he'd had the first day he'd been there. He curiously looks around Ben's shoulder at Richie's usual dining spot and tries not to think too much about where he could be right now.

"It was alright," He shrugs, "Same old, same old. How was film club?"

"Uh-Amazing! We started writing a scruh-script for this movie about this- well, I'll suh-spare you the details. It's an ad-ad-adventure style fil-lm," Then, he shyly picks at the bread on his sub, "I kuh-kind of had y-you in muh-muh-mind for one of th-the major characters."

Everyone at the table turns to look at him with excited eyes and smiles, "Me? I don't know about that, Bill. I don't think I can act."

His ears burn red at even the thought of other people watching him deliver lines, let alone having it filmed and able to be seen by anybody who wants to watch some cheesy film made by 11th

graders.

“Have you ever acted in anything before?” Asks Mike, “Because you never know until you try it.”

“Yeah, plus it might be a good excuse to get your mother to let you stay over the weekend,” Ben helpfully points out, and Eddie finds himself flushing head to toe.

“I don’t know, guys,” Eddie starts and Bill looks sorely disappointed, “I’ll think about it, though.”

That seems to please Bill long enough to allow Eddie to slip in a question of his own, “Have any of you seen Richie? He’s almost always in our room when I get back but-” He pauses, not wanting to point out that he knows enough of Richie’s habits to come to the conclusion that he’s been gone all weekend, “-he still hasn’t come back. And he’s not over there,” He uses his fork to point in the direction of Richie’s table.

“I don’t think I’ve seen him at all this weekend,” Stan shrugs, “Shouldn’t you just enjoy the peace and quiet while you can?” The other boys laugh, and Eddie tries to. It’s weird, it feels like two halves of his life are separated. He hasn’t really mentioned that him and Richie are almost-friends. Not quite friends, but getting there. He’s not sure what they would think. He and Richie talk all the time in the safety of their dorm but it never overlaps with the outside world; they never speak in classes and they never eat meals together. He knows that his friends don’t mean any harm, really, they’re just going off of the minimal knowledge they have of Richie- but he still feels a little defensive when they rag on him. If they just got to know him they’d really like him, he’s sure of it.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon, Eddie,” Ben seems to take notice of his inner turmoil, offering him a small smile, “I don’t think he’s ever missed a day of school. Not that I can remember, at least.”

That is definitely *supposed* to make him feel better, but it does the exact opposite. Because if Richie never misses a day of school, and he doesn’t show up before class tomorrow, doesn’t that mean that something is *really* wrong?

Some stupid voice in his head whispers about lung cancer and how Eddie should have thrown out Richie's pack of cigarettes when he had the chance, but he knows that's ridiculous and that the chances of a sixteen-year-old getting lung cancer are slim.

Richie doesn't return before lights out.

Eddie reluctantly turns out the desk lamp when the RA passes by and crawls under the covers, sparing a glance at Richie's neatly made bed sorrowfully. Certainly, he'll be there by the morning, right?

Richie *does* arrive by morning- in fact, he arrives before morning. The door opens with a gentle creak that wakes Eddie out of his fitful sleep.

Faint light floods into the room from somewhere in the hallway, making Richie look like a shadow with no discernable features. Eddie still knows it's him, from the way he stands and the outline of his hair.

"Richie? Fuck, it's late-" His eyes flick over to the digital clock on the desk next to Richie's hip, "It's almost one in the morning."

"Don't get your panties in a wad, princess. Give me a second to change into pajamas and then you can go back to sleep," Eddie doesn't fight the urge to roll his eyes at his words, groggily pushing aside the sheets to set his feet onto the ground. His eyes adjust to the dim lighting, able to see his eyes more clearly behind the shine of Richie's glasses. He looks tired, small blue half-moons under his eyes.

"Why are you here so late? You're always here when I get back," He bites the inside of his cheek to stop himself from tacking on '*I missed you*'.

"You shouldn't ask so many questions, just enjoy your time alone," Richie makes a lewd masturbation gesture with his hands before opening the closet to retrieve some pajamas. They're the same ones he wore on his first night- Tom and Jerry shirt with black gym shorts. Eddie can't help the fond smile that appears on his face despite

Richie's obnoxious comments.

"I was *worried*, asshole," Eddie admits, keeping his eyes firmly on Richie's face as he shuffles out of his pants to put on his shorts. He doesn't miss the way Richie briefly halts his movements, gaze meeting Eddie's, before scrambling to pull his shorts up the rest of the way.

"You missed me, Eddie Spaghetti? I'm flattered," His voice has a teasing edge to it, like it always does, but there's something honest to it. Genuine surprise at the thought of being missed, at someone noticing his lack of presence.

"My ears were ringing from the silence without you around," Eddie sighs, watching as Richie clambers into his bed, moving like a newborn deer, "But yeah, I missed your dumb jokes. Being around you makes me the smartest person in the room, it does wonders for my ego."

"Just when I think you're about to be nice to me, you go and deliver the best insult ever," Richie's cackling is loud and genuine, and Eddie giggles in between his attempts to shush him. If anyone is out there, they'll be written up for being loud so late at night, "I missed you too, Spaghetti," Richie says after his laughter has died down, taking Eddie by surprise. It sounds soft and real, in a way that it never has any of the other times Eddie has returned after a weekend away. He returns to his position under the covers, tucking his now-cold feet under the heavy comforter.

A heavy warmth settles into his body, like the feeling of lying next to a fireplace or opening the oven to check on cookies. It's the same feeling he gets when he spends a half hour after class talking to Stan, or when he's laughing so hard with Mike that his ribs ache. Despite Richie's terrible jokes and innocent inability to know the right time to stop talking, Eddie knows with absolute certainty that Richie is his friend- no matter what anyone else has to say about him.

"Hey, would you want to sit me and my friends for breakfast or lunch tomorrow?" Eddie tries not to think about the protests Stan would have about Richie sitting with them, he *knows* in his heart that he will warm up to him over time, if he'd just give him a chance.

Richie's face is squished snugly against the pillow, the right half of it warped under the weight. The smile that stretches across his face has Eddie's heart in his throat, "Is this a date, Eds?" He teases, remembering suddenly to take his glasses off before he falls into sleep, "Would your friends be okay with that?"

Eddie tries his best to appear confused at the thought of his friends not wanting Richie around, but Richie just snorts.

"I know what everyone says about me. That I'm loud and annoying and I have a big dick."

"Oh my god!" Eddie throws a pillow at him but laughs anyway, pouting when Richie doesn't immediately toss the pillow back to him, "They won't mind. We're all kind of... *losers* anyway. What's one more?"

The pillow is thrown back towards him gently, and he shoves it under his head as Richie rolls over onto his back to look up at the ceiling, "Okay. I'll meet you and the Losers Club at breakfast tomorrow."

They both fall asleep with giddy smiles on their faces, sleepily blinking at each other across the darkness of their room.

Eddie goes about his normal routine, heading out the door before Richie can barely get his eyes open to shower and get ready for the day. He *might* rush through it just so he can ensure that he gets downstairs to the cafeteria as early as possible to prepare the others for Richie joining them for their meal.

He tries to ignore the anxious gnawing at his gut, this *want* for his other friends to like Richie as much as he does. Maybe it's his inherent need for others approval, or maybe it's something more. It's something like when someone set two of their friends up on a date, but instead he's proposing an addition to their little friend group, an addition that they've previously stated they're wary of. If they'd just give him a chance, they'd see.

Eddie isn't even sure why he cares, truly. Him and Richie are friends, sure, but just barely. They don't know much about each other beyond their shared interests. Eddie knows hardly anything about Richie personally because anytime it seems like he's close to learning something new, the subject has been changed before he can blink. They're friendly acquaintances, at best.

But still, he wants them to like Richie.

"Guys, I have something to say," He says as soon as they all join him at the table he's been sitting at for fifteen minutes, waiting.

"Wuh-wow. Nuh-never known you to be suh-so forward, Eddie," Bill grins, sitting on the other side of Eddie's bag and not seeming to notice it was strategically put there.

Stan, on the other hand, immediately senses that something is going on, "What big thing could have possibly happened between last night and this morning?"

Eddie takes a deep breath in, observes the whole table, then pushes out all the words in one go, "I invited Richie to sit with us, please give him a chance."

Mike and Ben seem unaltered, continuing to eat at their food, but Eddie doesn't miss how Mike's eyes sneak up to check Stan's reaction.

"Why would you invite him? I thought you didn't even like him?" Stan already seems resigned to it, though, leaning his head into his hand exasperatedly.

"I never said I didn't like him," Eddie mumbles quietly, poking at his food. His eyes catch Richie in the line for food waving enthusiastically at him. He involuntarily smiles back, "He's a little annoying, sure. But he's really nice, and he's... I think he's lonely."

"I'm with Eddie," Mike announces, looking regretfully at Stan, "I know that he's... a *lot*. But, imagine if we had judged each other by our first impressions. I thought Stan was stuck-up when I first met him, just like all of the other students here. And he *is* stuck-up, so I was right. But he's stuck-up in a good way," That earns a bashful

smile from Stan, which Mike returns, “I think we should give him a chance. If Eddie likes him, he can’t be too bad.”

Before anyone gets a chance to respond, Richie’s at the table, looking much less confident than he usually does. Eddie moves his bag onto the floor and pats the spot between him and Bill.

Richie waves at everyone awkwardly once he settles in his spot beside Eddie, “Eddie’s friends, nice to meet you. I’m Richie and I, uh, know all your names from... from classes and stuff.”

Eddie tries not to laugh at how shy he sounds. He leans close to Eddie like he’s an anchor, and as their arms slide against each other, Eddie realizes it’s the first time they’d ever touched. His skin buzzes under the attention and he presses closer to Richie, their shoulders lining up against one another.

There’s an awkward silence that follows, with Stan refusing to look up from his food to *at least* nod at Richie or *something*, and everyone else smiling at Richie only to steal awkward glances at each other. Eddie wishes there was a way to turn Richie off and on again because he seems to be malfunctioning. This dumbass next to him doesn’t seem to realize just how much is on the line right now, with Stan practically steaming from his seat on the bench.

“Hey, uh, Billy, aren’t you in the film club? What’s that like? I’ve always wanted to join but... well, you know...” Richie starts strong but trails off awkwardly, and Bill winces at the words. Eddie looks between the two of them, opening his mouth to ask what *that* meant, but he takes notice of Bill’s contemplative expression and thinks better of it.

Ben luckily fills in the blanks, “Richie tried to join the club Freshman year, but for some reason the President and his friends decided to be jerks and-”

“Can we change the ending to this story so I look heroic and Eddie doesn’t think I’m sad and pathetic?” Richie huffs, looking over at Eddie with mild irritation, “I burned the club to the ground because they wouldn’t let me in, then seduced each of their mothers so I became their stepdads and now I make their lives a living hell.”

“Thuh-those guys were uh-assholes. I cuh-couldn’t do anything about i-it back when I was a Fuh-Freshman, but nuh-now that I’m a Junior I’m the Puh-Puh-President of the club.”

“Wait a second,” Richie starts, characteristic, devilish grin appearing on his face, “Are you saying if I kiss your ass enough you might let me be in the club?” Stan looks like he’s in disbelief at Bill’s invitation, even Ben looks a little thrown off, “What should I bribe you with? Weed, cigarettes, alcohol?”

Eddie chokes on his orange juice, and luckily Bill says, “No, bribing isn’t nuh-nuh-necessary. Just, show up on time and don’t make me luh-look like an asshole for inviting you, oka-okay?” His gaze moves to Eddie, a smirk forming, “And muh-maybe you could cuh-cuh-convince Eddie to be in our muh-movie. He won’t duh-do it.”

“I already said maybe!” Eddie whines. But ‘maybe’ means ‘no’ and Bill knows it, and he’s already seemed to notice that Eddie has some weird Achilles heel in the form of Richie. He immediately glares at Richie when his head whirls around, eyes all big and excited, trying to communicate ‘*Don’t you dare*’ without even opening his mouth. It doesn’t seem to work.

“Eddie! You *have* to be in their movie!” Shaking his head, Eddie turns back to his food, ignoring his red cheeks as he stuffs his face full with pancakes, “Why not? You’d be a school celebrity!”

Richie’s hands come up to his shoulder, shaking him back and forth until Eddie drops his fork to shove him away. Stan cuts in, “Eddie is stubborn as a mule, good luck convincing him to do anything,” He sounds annoyed, but he’s watching Eddie be attacked by Richie’s grabby hands fondly. Fondly, but also a little smugly, like he’s trying to tell Eddie ‘*I told you so*’. Eddie maturely sticks his tongue out at him.

“Oh, I’ll convince him, just wait and see.”

And there’s something about the certainty in his voice, the look of determination in his eye, that makes Eddie blush and look down at his lap again. There’s something warm that settles in his chest, like something giving way under pressure, when he watches his friends

laugh and chat with Richie- and somewhere in his mind he knows he should put more thought into this moment, into the way his eyes linger on Richie's enthralled face a bit too long, but before he can it's time to part ways and go to their classes.

Richie joins them for lunch and dinner, and much to Stan's dismay, they all get along incredibly well. Even Stan begrudgingly takes quite a liking to him, rolling his eyes in the affectionate way he usually only does with his other friends. Stan is tough to crack, but Richie does it nearly effortlessly, and Eddie thinks that there must have been a missing puzzle piece in their group in the shape of Richie. Looking around at the six of them whooping with laughter, everything feels more whole than before.

The Losers Club est. 1993

That night, they send hushed whispers across the space between their beds after lights out. Stomachs to the mattress, faces squished against their pillows as usual.

"No wonder Mr. Bitters hates you," Eddie snorts as Richie finishes his tall tale of the time he was caught drawing a dick on the hood of Mr. Bitters car, "How were you not expelled on the spot?"

Enthused laughter spills from Richie's lips, enjoying Eddie's interest in his story, "I'm shaping up to be Valedictorian, they wouldn't expel me that easily."

"You? King of 'Your Mom' jokes is going to be Valedictorian?" Eddie rolls his eyes and shakes his head, "No fucking way. I'd sooner believe David Puddy would be the Valedictorian."

"I've got a 4.0 GPA, smartass. But David Puddy *would* fit in well at this school, with all the rest of these Jesus-fucking fuckers."

"Except Stan," Eddie smirks over at Richie.

"Huh?"

“Stan’s Jewish, remember?” Eddie taps the back of his head to symbolize a Kippah.

“Oh fuck, I forgot,” Richie laughs, hair on his forehead fluttering at the movement, “Why the fuck does he even go to this school? Just to give the Seniors a reason to pick in him?”

“No,” Eddie sighs, “The closest Jewish boarding school was all the way in New Hampshire, and his parents wanted him to be close enough to come home on the weekends, so, here he is.”

Somewhere out in the hall, there’s the sound of shuffling. Richie’s voice quiets at the thought of the RA listening to them, “What about you?” At Eddie’s confused expression, he elaborates, “You know, are you Catholic?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“That means nothing, Eds. I’m a Scientologist,” Eddie grabs his inhaler off the nightstand and chucked it at him.

“Shut up, no you are not,” They laugh quietly for a while, before Eddie purses his lips and thinks over his answer, “I don’t think I’m anything. I thought I was Catholic for a long time but... as I started to grow up, I just... felt like it wasn’t for me. I’d like to believe in God, though, I just don’t know if I can,” It feels good, admitting it out loud. It’s his own secret rebellion against his mother, shared between just him and Richie and their four dorm room walls.

Richie nods like it makes perfect sense, “My mom always took me to church, and the Sunday school teachers hated me. I was too loud, too immature. And when I started to attend the actual adult Mass, I felt... attacked. Like I was Judas, or something,” He looks like he’s talking to himself, rather than to Eddie, with his gaze peering up at one of the shadowy corners of the room. His fingers curl in fists around the top of the comforter. He turns suddenly, eyes searching Eddie’s face for something Eddie doesn’t know how to offer, “I think I believe in God, just not in organized religion. Maybe, I don’t know. I’m fucking sixteen. I believe in cigarettes and sex, that’s it.”

“Well,” Eddie hums, thoughtfully tugging at the strands of hair

sticking up from his neck, “I can’t say I agree with all *that*, but I don’t think the church is home for people like us.”

“Losers?” Richie asks, sounding so serious, but there’s a faint glimmer of a crooked smile on his face.

“Yeah, losers.”

The room goes quiet, just the two of them memorizing each others face in the moonlight. In this lighting, without his glasses or crumpled button-up uniform, Richie looks so soft. His face is full of sharp angles- a strong jawline, pointed chin, aquiline nose. But, in the warm clutches of sleep, Eddie thinks he looks almost delicate, like porcelain.

“Thanks for inviting me today. I...” Richie trails off, looking small in his sweatshirt that is far too big on him, voice quiet and unsure, “Could I- Do you think that-”

“You’re invited to hang out with us indefinitely, Rich,” He answers honestly, and is glad that he didn’t beat around the bush when Richie’s eyes light up in the blue moonlight.

Richie doesn’t say anything, only nods against the pillow beneath him. It’s not often that he’s quiet, even when he’s in a bad mood he goes on rants that could stretch on for hours if Eddie doesn’t find a way to shut him up before he gets too passionate.

Both of them roll over onto their backs at the same time, and Eddie traces his eyes mind-numbingly over the divots in the popcorn ceiling. After years of feeling uncomfortable under his mom’s roof, terrified of doing so much as clearing his throat, he’s thankful for this little slice of freedom he’s been allowed to have. This little room, with moonlight streaming in and dirty underwear hanging out of the hamper, and Richie’s even breathing filling the quiet of the air, is more home than his mother had ever been. He hated returning to her grasp over the weekends.

Eddie opens his mouth to speak but the words are caught in his throat, scared that asking questions like this will only push Richie away. He presses through the fear and allows the words to croak out,

anyway, “I... I don’t mean to pry but, where were you this weekend? I’d assume you were with your parents but you were dropped off so late and-”

And Richie, rude as ever, cuts him off with the same snores that had been waking Eddie up at night since he moved in. His head swings over his shoulder, catching Richie laying on his side, one hand tucked under his cheek and the other dangling off the bed, mouth open at an unattractive angle and a little furrow between his brows.

Eddie is glad he isn’t awake to see the cheesy way he smiles, and he pretends not to feel the quickened beating of his heart.

Notes for the Chapter:

Bev will be in the upcoming chapters! I love her so much and have pretty good plans for her, I think. I'm not quite sure if she'll make it into the next one, yet, though.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie's going through it, but he's not going through it alone.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm sorry for the slow-ish updates! Usually I crank 'em out really fast, but I have been out of it lately. Please accept my humble offering of a shorter than normal, cliffhanger chapter.

Old St. Anthony's Boarding School was built in 1814 in Bangor, Maine with sprawling staircases and intricate marble crown molding. It was beautiful, if Richie was being honest, with all the pretty green bushes and 800 identically dressed boys perusing around the grounds, clambering down staircases and laughing with one another. It was picturesque, clean-cut and filled with rich history.

Sophomore year, the gathered up the first twenty boys who wandered into the courtyard during lunch to take a photo for a brochure, the kind they put in churches around the state to pull more unlucky suckers into the school. Richie was one of the lucky twenty that spent the next few minutes being arranged strategically by the no-nonsense photographer, arms being adjusted and hair combed back. Just as the photographer was about to take the photograph, he pulled away from the camera for a brief moment.

"Excuse me, son, do you think you could take your glasses off? It's just that, nobody else here is wearing glasses and it makes-"

"Oh no, it's fine, uh," Richie plucked them off of his face, patting down his pockets which contained several coins and keys and sharp objects that would certainly get Richie in trouble with his mother if they scratched his lenses, "Let me go put them in my bag, it's just down the hall."

He turned on his heel towards the doorway behind them, and while

he was gone the picture was taken as though he had never been there in the first place.

And that feeling, that *stupid*, lonely feeling is exactly how Richie has felt since he started at boarding school. The photographer just wanted to do his dumb job and get on with his life, but it just attributed to the overwhelming feeling that Richie was never supposed to be here in the first place.

In the courtyard, surrounded by neatly trimmed bushes and trees and so much marble Michelangelo would have thought he was in heaven, Richie looks especially out of place. He lays flat on his back in the little patch of grass overshadowed by a large, ornate bench. It's a little too chilly in the shade like this, but it hides him from the immediate view of teachers and other students, well enough that he can hear them coming and put out his cigarette under a heavy stone before anyone sees him.

With his hair all splayed out on the grass under him, big glasses reflecting the blue sky, wrinkled uniform shirt untucked and tie loosened, he imagines he looks like a parasite St. Anthony's has upchucked onto the trimmed lawn. It wouldn't be the worst insult he's heard. Or overheard.

People talk about him from time to time in this courtyard without realizing he's there. After classes, when Richie goes for his smoke breaks, everyone is typically studying in the library or napping in their rooms. It's prime time for smoking without getting caught. But, there have been a few occasions after the past two years that Richie has heard a couple of students laughing about him. It's not often- it's not like he's the talk of the school or anything- and it's never enough to really, truly bother him. But still, it settles in this little cave in his chest just below his heart, like a jar where he keeps all the worst things that have ever happened to him, and he expects that maybe someday they'll all come flooding out in a tidal wave- if he doesn't die first.

And for all the years Richie had spent stuffing down all these bad moments and mountain of self-pity, there were some good moments, too. Like painting a dick on Bitters car, or that time he pulled a prank on Hockstetter without him ever realizing it was Richie who did it.

And, the cherry on top of the cake of good moments- *Eddie*.

Richie had unfairly written him off as ‘just another Catholic schoolboy’, but that wasn’t the truth at all. Eddie is funny and can rise up to Richie’s banter perfectly, he’s smart and has a brain that isn’t plugged into the asses of the faculty. He is something Richie hadn’t been prepared for, and it has been a long, long time since anything has caught Richie off guard.

To top it all off, Eddie has some fucking awesome friends. They’re clearly very apprehensive about allowing Richie into the group, and that’s okay. He gets it. No one really wants to be around the loud kid with big glasses and a knack for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Nonetheless, they let him eat every meal with them and most of them laugh at his jokes, except Stan. Still, he thinks he’s managed to steal a few tiny, *tiny* smiles from him after he gets off a particularly good one. It’s only been a week, and he’s sure that eventually Stan will love him, he’s just playing hard to get.

“My dad died of lung cancer, did you know that?” A voice says just behind his ear, and he yelps loudly, flicking the cigarette behind his head toward the bed of rocks.

“Christ, Kaspbrak! The lung cancer can’t kill me if you give me a heart attack first,” Eddie just laughs as he lays down next to him on the little grass patch, hair all ruffled from the stress of the day. He’d been bitching about a big math exam he had that day, and it seems to be a nervous habit of his to pull on his hair when he’s particularly stressed.

“I’m just saying, if you die of lung cancer I’ll never forgive myself. And then it will be your fault for emotionally scarring the kid whose dad died,” They smile over their shoulders at each other, and even if Eddie’s smile is more of a smug, evil smirk Richie still feels giddy at the sight.

“Are you seriously trying to guilt-trip me by using your dead father? That’s fucked up, man,” Eddie just hums happily in response, sharply flicking Richie’s hip.

“You’re fucked up,” Eddie retorts immaturely.

“It’s Friday,” Richie says suddenly, lips turning down into a pout, “You’re going home tonight,” From what little Richie had gathered, Eddie’s mom was a pain in the ass, helicopter parent. Eddie used the payphone in the hall to call her every Wednesday night, and when Richie occasionally passed by it *always* sounded like Eddie was on the verge of hanging up and tearing his hair out.

“Just for the weekend,” Eddie reminds him, but he looks just as downtrodden as Richie feels, “I wish I could stay.”

“Why don’t you just agree to do Bill’s movie? We have a meeting for it tomorrow night, there’s no way she wouldn’t agree to let you do something school-related with your friends,” He pauses, furrowing his eyebrows and nudging his knuckles against Eddie’s that lay next to him, “Right?”

“I don’t know if she’d agree to let me stay and... I don’t know... acting? I’ve never done anything like that. What if I’m awful?”

“So what if you’re awful? It’s a shitty film created by a bunch of high schoolers for *fun*. Ever heard of ‘fun’, Eds?” He uses his elbow to jab at Eddie’s ribs, triumphantly grinning as he squawks and pushes at Richie’s shoulder, “Plus, this meeting is just to go over the script. You still wouldn’t have to agree to anything, if you don’t want to.”

Eddie’s lip catches in between his teeth and he hums thoughtfully, “I’ll call her,” He announces and pulls his warm presence away before Richie can scramble up off the ground to follow him down the hallway.

Mrs. Kaspbrak, much to Eddie’s surprise, agrees to let him stay the weekend as long as he ‘doesn’t get up to any funny business’. Richie fights with the teasing grin on his face as he listens to Eddie say ‘Yes, Ma’ and ‘I promise, Mommy’ over the payphone, and makes sex noises in the background just to see Eddie’s ears burn red. When he hangs up, the bored, mildly irritated expression disappears and morphs into a wide smile and bright eyes.

Richie declares that this on-campus weekend will be the best one yet.

Patrick Hockstetter always has other plans, though.

Patrick has been a nuisance since Richie had started boarding school. From the few things he knows about Patrick, he has gathered that he had also started boarding school in fourth grade, but he is a year older than Richie. Once Patrick graduates (God willing, he would graduate), Richie expects his own senior year will be the best one yet, with no menacing freak following him around, making his life a living hell. He just had to get through his Junior year, first.

But when Patrick's hand grips the side of his head and shoves him into the bathroom wall so hard that Richie thinks he can taste blood in his mouth, he's not exactly sure he will make it to next year.

He tumbles down onto the tile floor, hands stinging as they slap against the ground to hold himself up.

"Get up, Tozier," Patrick says, like it's so fucking easy to stand up when your brain is throbbing in your head. He tries, anyway, to struggle off the ground, but the tile is slippery and his hands are wet from the shower and he only succeeds in lifting up a few inches before Patrick lands a kick on his stomach.

"Fuck," He groans, curling into a ball instinctively. Bile rises into his throat, burning and making his eyes water, "What the fuck do you want?" He manages to croak out.

"Told you not to fucking shower in here," Patrick spits, sounding completely irrational- as if Richie could really shower anywhere else even if he wanted to. There's no reason for him to pick on Richie, ever. He avoids Patrick whenever he can, tries to appease his dumb fucking requests whenever possible, and never hits back, *ever*. If he could crawl inside Patrick's brain and nitpick his memories, he might find some disturbingly messed up home life, maybe. Maybe Patrick's just a psychopath. There's no way of knowing, but whatever it is, Patrick sorely needs someone to take his anger out on and it seems like Richie is the target he has picked and stuck with for the past seven years.

And as Richie rolls onto his back, looking up at Patrick's face, the dark look in his eyes signifies that tonight he's in need of his fix more than ever.

"I already told you," He coughs weakly, willing the bile to go back down to his stomach. He just finished showering and changing into fresh clothes, the last thing he needs is to vomit all over himself, "If I don't shower I'm sending anyone who has complaints about the smell directly to you, and I don't think you'd want that."

As though he'd said nothing at all, Patrick continues, "Faggots like you should shower at St. Agnes' down the street, with the rest of the girls."

"I have a dick," Richie answers, rolling onto his stomach to avoid another kick and pushing up off the ground, "I don't suppose you want proof?"

The moment he gets to stand up straight again, Patrick grips onto his shoulders and shoves him against the wall. Pain crackles down his spine like several bombs detonating and all the air escapes his lungs violently. He dry-heaves instantly, still held back by Patrick's hands and he prays to whatever might be out there that the RA will come running in at any second and tell them to 'quit rough-housing' but then he remembers that he had wandered into the showers only ten minutes before lights out, and the RA is likely gone by now.

Well, fuck.

"No proof necessary," Is all Patrick says before kneeing him in the balls so hard that Richie vomits directly onto him, gloriously covering him in an obscene color of puke that he'll be sure to laugh at later but can't really bring himself to think about as he collapses onto the bathroom floor once more and rolls around in pain. He faintly hears Patrick freaking out and running back to the showers to wash himself off.

Completely humiliated and in an immense amount of pain, he knows he needs to get out of there while he still can, so he scrambles up and for the second time that semester, Richie takes off down the hallway in a rush, but this time it's nearly pitch black and there's no one in

sight, not even the RA.

He pushes into his room as quietly as he can, trying desperately to not let the tears burning his eyes fall onto his cheeks. There is almost no light in the room with his eyes still adjusting to the darkness, and he knows Eddie is likely in his bed so he makes a point to not look in that direction whatsoever. Pulling open the closet door, he throws whatever he can find- pajamas and day clothes- into his backpack after he dumps the books in it onto his bed.

“Richie, what the fuck are you doing?” Comes Eddie’s harsh whisper, but Richie just focuses all his attention on shoving items into his backpack. *Fuck this school and everyone in it*, he thinks.

“Mind your business, Spaghetti. It’s not polite to pry,” He tosses his toiletries into the backpack and zips it closed, pulling it onto his shoulder. Why can’t Eddie just mind his own business? Why does he *always* have to ask questions?

“Are you leaving?” Eddie asks, stepping into Richie’s line of sight angrily, “Don’t ignore me, asshole. Where are you going?”

“I’m getting the fuck out of here,” Richie responds, trying not to sound angry, but Eddie flinches back anyway, “I can’t stand this fucking place, Eds. I’m leaving.”

He hates how Eddie’s face contorts into tender pity, watching Richie fall apart at the seams. It’s not him who’s broken, it’s the rest of the pretentious douchebags at this school. He just needs to get out of here.

“What happened? Don’t go, let’s talk about it. We have a meeting with the film club tomorrow, remember?” Eddie suddenly touches his wrists, sounding like he’s scrambling for any reason to make him stay. Richie pulls back, startled and angered by the sparks that shoot through his belly at the touch. No, no, no. If Hockstetter thought for even a *second* that he had feelings for Eddie, who knows what he’d do. He can’t let that happen.

“Fuck the film club,” He says, but instantly frowns when Eddie’s forehead wrinkles in distress, “I’ll probably be back for the meeting,

don't worry. I just, I need to get out of here. I think I'll suffocate if I-

"I'm coming with you, then," Eddie interrupts.

"What?"

"I'm coming with you, dickwad, whether you like it or not," He repeats, and Richie's hands stop shaking in favor of latching onto Eddie's shoulders.

"Are you serious?" Eddie doesn't hesitate a second before nodding, "Okay, pack some clothes and your toothpaste and stuff. Stay quiet."

Fuck this school and everyone in it- except Eddie, he corrects himself, and watches Eddie scramble around the room selecting items to bring with him in his fancy duffle bag. There is no doubt, Eddie is one hell of a wild card. Just like that, he turned a moment of desperation into one of excitement and adventure, and Richie is seconds away from hugging him so hard he squeezes the life out of him.

"I'm ready," Eddie says, duffle bag snug on his shoulder, big eyes narrowed in a look of determination. Richie can't help the smile on his face, even if it is weighed down by tears still tugging at the back of his throat. His eyes have adjusted to the darkness of the room, allowing him to see Eddie all washed over by moonlight, fists clenched, eyebrows drawn. Looking a tad like he's willing to beat up whoever caused this whole ordeal in the first place. Never has there been a warrior more intimidating than this petite, angry boy in front of him.

Richie pivots toward the door, opening it and poking his head out to the weak light of the hallway. No one is in sight.

"Stay quiet," Richie whispers again, "And just-" He cuts himself off, reaching down and gripping onto Eddie's hand, "-Trust me, okay?"

And then they're off, Richie dragging him down the stairs by his hand, the two of them grinning like madmen.

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie always thought Richie was the blind one.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi peeps! It's late but I just had to get this done! I was so excited to post it! Let me know what you think kiddos ;)

Eddie fingers the outline of the inhaler in his pocket with his free hand, the other clutched tightly in Richie's clammy, slender hand. And even though his heart is threatening to jump out of his chest and his forehead is beginning to show a thin layer of anxiety-induced sweat, he doesn't feel the need to actually take a puff of his inhaler with Richie holding onto him the way he is. Eddie couldn't explain it if he tried, but there's something about Richie that envelops a room in warmth and safety, that puts Eddie at ease before he even has a chance to freak out. Would he trust Richie to help him if he was bleeding out or in immediate danger? Probably not. But, dragging him out of the lightless school with a scarily hell-bent look on his face? Eddie trusts him to get them out safely.

He's pretty confident in his decision to trust Richie fully as they stumble through the courtyard, but when Richie leads them to the edge of campus that's lined with a high, ornate fence with pretty little spikes on top, he decides that maybe trusting Richie was his worst idea yet.

"Richie, I'm barely five and a half feet tall. How the fuck am I supposed to climb over this gate?" Richie moves out of his line of sight, pulling his hand away, and Eddie's eyes stay locked on the top of the daunting fence, pretending like he doesn't miss the warmth of his sweaty hand in his, "Even if I get over it, I could die by falling onto the sidewalk over there. I broke my arm when I was thirteen, have I ever told you that? The doctors said if I'm not careful I could break it again because it's weak now. It hurt so fucking bad that first time, I *really* don't think I want to go through-

“Holy shit, I told you to stay quiet, Eds,” Richie says, but he’s laughing. Eddie’s vision snaps over to Richie, watching as he easily unlocks and opens the gate, “It’s all just security theatre, there are no real locks on anything.”

“You could have told me that in the first place,” Eddie snaps, but he can’t stay mad for long at the goofy grin Richie wears. He can hardly see in the night, only able to know that Richie’s smiling from the slight glimmer of his teeth.

Richie bows dramatically low, motioning for Eddie to walk past him and off the school premises. If he notices Eddie’s moment of hesitation before complying, he doesn’t say a single teasing word.

Though he desperately wants to ask where they’re headed, something tells Eddie it’s best if he keeps his mouth shut. Richie had looked so... so *lost*. Angry, but lost and so distressed. Like if he didn’t leave right at that moment he’d explode in fury or burst into tears or both. And God, that was not something Eddie ever wanted to see.

They wander down the sidewalk, side-by-side but dead silent. It’s uncomfortable, and Eddie kind of just wants to be holding onto his hand again. He looks down at it, swaying by Richie’s side, through a sideways glance. And he can’t help but wonder, why would he want to hold *Richie’s* hand? Richie, who probably never washes his hands. Richie, who has yellow nails on his pointer and middle fingers from smoking. Richie, who is a *boy*.

In a flash of panic, he thinks maybe Richie can *tell* that he’s having these thoughts, and he looks up to make sure that Richie isn’t looking back at him.

He’s not, and all the air Eddie was holding in releases in one go. But then, they step under the shine of a streetlight, and something glimmers on the side of Richie’s forehead. Some sort of liquid, but it’s not water from his shower because it’s too dark to be that- it’s *blood*.

“You’re bleeding!” He nearly shouts, pushing a hand on Richie’s shoulder to keep him from walking.

“Huh?” He says, swiping his fingertips through the trail of blood on

his face. He stares at it, rubs it between his thumb and forefinger. The source of the bleeding is hidden under his wild head of hair, "I guess I am. Didn't realize it was that bad. Got any bandaids?"

"Of course I don't have any fucking bandaids! Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?"

Richie's lips curl into a smile and he rubs at his cheek and forehead until the red liquid is all gone, "Scratch that. Do you have any tampons? Because you're acting like you're on your period right now," For that, Eddie socks him in the shoulder.

"You're always such an asshole when I'm *worried* about you," He rubs at the spot he hit sympathetically, unable to be a *complete* jerk to someone who's bleeding, "What happened? Did you fall?"

"Yeah, into Hockstetter," Richie grumbles sourly.

Anger courses through Eddie so fast he nearly sees red, "Someone *hit* you? I knew-" He cuts himself off, voice going quiet, "I knew that some boys were... mean to you. Like, made fun of you and stuff. But I didn't know..."

He's suddenly so angry at himself for letting his friends tease Richie behind his back. Sure, they liked him now and that was partially Eddie's doing, but Richie already had it bad enough at school and Eddie just stood by and watched it happen.

"Who's Hockstetter? What's he look like? I'm going to give him a piece of my mind tomorrow, I swear-"

Richie cuts Eddie off with a loud sigh, throws a hand over his forehead, and tilts his head back dramatically, "My hero!" He tries to turn around and collapse into Eddie's arms, but Eddie just pushes him off with an annoyed huff, "I don't need you getting a black eye just to defend my honor. You'll just get hurt, Patrick won't get in trouble, and then he'll beat me up again for telling you about it."

All Eddie can do is sigh and nod, because he's right. If either of them tell the Dean, Patrick will get a slap on the hand and- if he's as vicious as he sounds- he'll just become more bloodthirsty.

“Are there at least first aid supplies wherever we’re going? That cut could get infected,” He hopes that he might get a hint at where they’re headed to. They pick up their pace again, led on by Richie.

“Yeah, there should be at least some soap, water, and a bandaid,” Richie answers.

Eddie wants to argue that those aren’t the best supplies for disinfecting a wound, but he doesn’t think Richie would care anyway.

Ten minutes later Richie is leading him up the fire escape outside of a small apartment building in a ‘rougher’ area of town. Private schools were always built in places like this because the land was cheaper and easier to bulldoze the small houses their owners easily surrendered in exchange for some money. On the rare occasion he’d visited Bangor, his mom had always driven through here commenting on all the drugs and criminals and dirt. Though his mom has always been overdramatic, his skin still crawls as he tries to avoid touching any part of the fire escape with his bare hands.

“Please tell me we’re not breaking and entering,” Eddie pleads in between lungfuls of air as they wind their way up to the fourth floor.

“Where would the fun be in that?” Richie asks, and for a second Eddie thinks he might be serious. Contrary to his statement, though, he raises a fist up to the window in front of him and knocks in an odd pattern, one that is surely supposed to mean something.

They stare in complete silence at the window, and Eddie can see a light turn on behind the curtains. A figure moves around slowly, sleepily, and Eddie nearly turns around and forgets about the whole night when a head of bright red hair shows itself in front of the curtain.

It’s a girl, a beautiful girl with a gorgeous head of curly hair cut into a bob that sways as she waves at Richie excitedly. Her eyes are bright and beautiful in the light from the streetlamp, and she looks so ridiculously *happy* to see Richie. Eddie’s breath catches in his throat. Richie has a *girlfriend*.

The girl undoes the latches on the window and pulls Richie off the fire escape gracefully, enveloping him in a big hug as Eddie watches on awkwardly.

“Rich!” She exclaims as she rocks him back and forth like an odd sort of dance. Eddie can’t help but watch on in amusement as Richie struggles to free his arms and hug her back.

“I was going to ask you to ‘let down your hair’ but then I remembered- you cut it all off,” He teases, ruffling a hand through said fire-red locks. The two of them look so affectionate, so excited, and Eddie suddenly feels like he’s intruding on a very intimate moment. He pulls the sweatshirt he had thrown on before he left closer to him, adjusting the bag awkwardly.

“Who’s your cute little friend?” She asks, seeming to just notice Eddie standing there for the first time. His cheeks burn at the descriptors ‘cute’ and ‘little’ because he isn’t *either* of those things. Those are the kind of things his mother would call him and the last thing he needs is to be reminded of her and what she would think of his little excursion.

“This is my Eds!” Richie reaches through the window and helps Eddie climb over the fire escape.

“*Your* Eds?” She questions as Richie takes Eddie’s bag off his shoulder and sets it on the floor.

At that, Eddie rolls his eyes, “My name is just Eddie, not Eds or whatever weird name he comes up with. But I’m sure you’re used to that by now.”

“Nice to meet you Just Eddie, I’m Beverly. But Richie’s been calling me Bev since we were six years old, so that’s kind of just my name now,” Bev pulls him into a hug just as tight as the one she gave Richie. She’s warm and has the same smokey cigarette smell that always follows Richie, and he instantly feels safe in this random girl’s bedroom he snuck into in the middle of the night.

“Six years old?” He asks when he pulls away, looking over his shoulder at Richie who stands there wearing a buck-toothed grin.

"Bev lives right down the street from my parents, so we grew up together," Eddie draws his eyebrows together, confused. If Richie's parents are just down the street, why wouldn't he go to them? Why doesn't he ever go home on the weekends if they're only a three-minute drive away at most?

"We're practically siblings," Bev says, throwing an arm around Richie's shoulders and kicking a leg out at him.

Oh, so they're not dating.

Eddie looks between the two of them, and thinks they could almost pass as siblings if it weren't for their hair. A little trail of blood slips down the side of Richie's face and he's reminded of the cut that's hiding underneath his hair.

"Do you have any first aid supplies?" He asks, scanning the room for anything useful. Bev turns her face up to look at the fresh trail of blood with a gasp.

"Was this that *Patrick* motherfucker again?" She thumbs away the blood and Eddie holds his tongue because he so badly wants to ask how often this happens. He wonders if this is where Richie went last week and what it was that caused him to bolt then, if it was Patrick, and if it was, why did he have such enmity against Richie?

The bed makes a soft creak as Bev pushes Richie down on it, exiting the room as though she knows she's not going to get an answer from Richie. Eddie supposes she *does* know- since she's known him for years- that Richie hides behind tall walls and hedges like he's Rapunzel, and he does *not* want to be rescued. No hair being let down here.

Looking around the room, he spies a pack of cigarettes and a poster of New Kids on the Block that makes him laugh to himself. It's certainly a girl's room, but not what Eddie always imagined girls' rooms looked like with pink bed sheets and pretty rainbow stickers on the wall. It's as messy as their dorm room is when Richie hasn't picked up in a while, clothes scattered around the room and a couple of candy bar wrappers tucked in the space between the nightstand and bed. Her bedsheets are white with tiny blue flowers on them,

unmade and one of the pillows is on top of her dresser.

Richie watches him intensely from the bed as Eddie pretends he doesn't feel him staring. He shouldn't feel so awkward, but he does. Something about this feels a lot like Richie letting down his walls, opening up a little without even saying anything.

Sirens wail in the distance and Eddie jumps, shoulders tightening and hands clenching into fists. If his mother finds out he's here he'll never be allowed to do anything ever again. She'll take him out of boarding school immediately and she'll keep him as far away from Richie as possible. She hates boys like Richie.

"We're from the poor part of town," Richie says, sounding like an odd mix of apologetic and defensive, "It's not as bad as everyone makes it out to be, you know. You're not going to get shanked, or whatever."

"If anyone is going to shank me, it's you," Eddie says, trying to pretend he wasn't just generalizing an entire chunk of a city based on some things his mom told him. Whirling around, he tosses himself onto the bed beside Richie, "If my mom finds out I snuck out she'll..."

It's embarrassing, the hold his mother has on him. He doesn't like to admit how honestly afraid of her he is.

"Does she hurt you?" Richie picks at his nails, voice trembling from the weight of his question.

Sonia Kaspbrak is an abuser, she yells and cries and manipulates all day long. But she would never, *ever* lay a hand on Eddie. She's too smart to do that.

"No," Eddie answers, shaking his head, "She's just scary. Not in that normal 'scary mom' way, though. She makes me feel so bad," He pauses, glaring down at his shoes in an attempt to fight the sad lump in his throat, "about myself."

It's true. That's the worst thing his mother does, above all the fake pills and anger, is that she makes him feel guilty. She wails and cries and tells him he's a terrible son, that he's letting her down just like

his father did, that he's the reason she's so sad and stressed all the time. When he's around her, he feels like the dirt on the bottom of her shoe.

And Richie looks like he has a million things to say to that, but can't decide on just one. He doesn't have to, because Beverly kicks open the door, arms stuffed full of gauze and band-aids and ice packs.

"My Aunt is gone for the night- working," She says as she dawdles into the room, tossing supplies to and fro. Eddie takes a wet cloth from her hands and makes his way over to Richie, shoving him back clumsily. He commands him to push his hair out of his face and gets to work wiping at the cut. It isn't all that bad, about a quarter of an inch long but it had bled quite heavily.

"How is good ol' Auntie Marsh?" Richie says in his favorite Southern accent, the one that usually makes Eddie scowl while he tries to hide his giggles. It doesn't feel like his place to laugh, though.

"She's alright, now that you've gone back to school. She says you're a bad influence on me and when we pray at the dinner table she always thanks God that he took away the 'evil boy' in my life. Then every summer, without fail, she prays that he takes you away again," Bev smiles when Richie guffaws loudly, and Eddie can't really blame her. It's stupidly contagious when Richie smiles or laughs. Eddie hates it because most of Richie's jokes are terrible and don't deserve to be laughed at.

Bev suddenly points to Richie's stomach, "Is that vomit?"

Eddie follows her finger to Richie's T-shirt, and sure enough, there's vomit, "Oh, that is fucking disgusting. You're disgusting. Why is there vomit on your shirt? You took a shower an hour ago."

He pulls back and Richie immediately pouts, "It's not my fault, he kneed me in the balls!"

Bev snorts into her hand and Eddie looks at her like she's grown an extra head, "He kneed you in the balls so hard you puked? No fair, I always wanted to do that."

"I puked *on* him," Richie pumps a fist in the air, and he looks so proud of himself that Eddie joins in on Bev's fit of giggles, "It was like, bright blue, too. I ate a bunch of those blue sour punch straws *and* drank a ton of Cool Blue Gatorade."

"Oh my god," Eddie sputters, and Bev uses his shoulder to support herself as she doubles over.

"You're so gross, Richie. That's the funniest shit I've ever heard," Her laughter is just as contagious as Richie's and makes Eddie think about all the mischevious stuff these two must get up to during the summer.

"I mean, it cost the lives of my future children but yeah, it was pretty fucking funny," Eddie loves and hates how tickled pink Richie looks that they got a kick out of his story. The last thing Richie Tozier needs is an ego stroke, but Eddie keeps giggling anyway as he leans back in to continue cleaning his wound.

Big, cheerful eyes watch his movements from behind dorky square glasses that miraculously didn't break during his run-in with Patrick. Being so close gives Eddie an excuse to stare at the freckles that dot his skin like little flecks of paint, the individual hairs of his eyebrows that grow in all the wrong spots. There's another scar on his forehead, lower and smaller, maybe from another fight or maybe just from popping a pesky zit. Eddie doesn't think he's ever been this close to another boy before, stomach inflating with butterflies and heart picking up to a steady jog in his chest and it hits him all at once just how beautiful he finds boys and just how beautiful he finds Richie. The smallest gasp escapes him, he yanks himself upright and turns away from Richie when he stares at him with questioning eyes.

"J-Just need a butterfly bandaid," He manages to cough out, extending a hand to Beverly. He puts the bandaid in place and pulls away from the warmth of Richie as quickly as he can.

Now his skin burns with the elongated way Bev observes him, practiced and omniscient. Richie reaches out to grab onto his elbow, pull himself up, and Eddie's nerves crackle like fireworks on New Years.

"I don't suppose you have two sleeping bags?" Richie asks her, and

Eddie wants to grab him by the shoulders and ask why he didn't think of sleeping arrangements before he let Eddie go with him. He's only overreacting, he knows that. He's hypersensitive from the sudden realization that he finds boys *pretty* and what the fuck does that *mean*?

And Bev says, as though Eddie just entered his own personal hell, "You ladies can share the bed, I got the sleeping bag."

Eddie just needs a second alone to *think* before he tears his hair out, has an asthma attack, and dies all at once. A fist grips around his esophagus and *squeezes* and he whips out his inhaler to take a big puff even though he knows Richie will tease him.

Sure enough, "Aw, Eds, don't worry. I'll be a proper gentleman," The Southern Belle voice is back, and Eddie rolls his eyes even with his mouth still around his inhaler.

"It's not that, just fucking stressed about sneaking out," Eddie grits out, tugging his sweatshirt over his head to reveal the flannel button-up pajamas Richie always made fun of him for. At least he blended in with everyone else, rather than walking around in gym shorts and dumb graphic t-shirts.

Eddie makes his way up to the top of the bed, scooting all the way towards the edge that's pressed against the wall. Luckily, it's not a twin bed like the ones at the dorms, but rather a sizeable queen.

Richie thankfully tugs off his vomit-stained shirt but Eddie nearly chokes when he realizes Richie is not going to replace it with another one. Instead, he gets under the covers next to Eddie completely shirtless. Despite all the blood and talk of blue-colored vomit and balls Eddie still feels his skin prickle at the heat of his body next to him. Using his teeth to pick at his lip, he stiffly settles down on the pillow and mumbles a 'goodnight' to Bev before she turns out the light, coating the room in a milky-white, soft light. In a distant corner, a tiny nightlight coats one half of the room in pretty golden hues and Eddie hates that both the coolness of the moon and the warmth of the night light are attractive colors on Richie- how had he not seen it until now?

How had he not noticed when they were gazing across the room at each other late at night, that staring at the hook of your friend's nose or the curve of his lips or the fluttering of his eyelashes wasn't *normal*?

They gaze at each other now, but this time there's only a few inches between them rather than several feet, and this time Richie's knuckles are brushing against his own outstretched hand, and this time all of his nerve endings are lit on fire with *awareness*.

"Thank you," Richie says delicately like it's at all possible to have a private conversation while sharing a room with a girl who's wide awake in a sleeping bag a few feet away.

"For what?" Eddie asks, because he's really not sure what there is to thank him for.

Richie shrugs like he's not too sure what he's thanking him for, either, "Everything," And Eddie would have expected him to thank him for sneaking out with him, or fixing up his wound, or never kneeing him in the balls like Patrick did, no matter how bad his jokes were. But instead, Richie thanks him, "For never treating me like a freak."

And it's so gentle and quiet that Eddie's chest depresses in one swift movement, all the air gone and his tongue clicks against the roof of his mouth, dry. He needs Richie to say a joke, to make some sexual innuendo for no good reason, to do *anything* to save Eddie from needing to respond, but he just stares, eyes boring into Eddie's like there's something he's trying to find.

Eddie stares back, "You're not a freak," He says, means it honestly. Means it more than anything else he's ever said to Richie.

And he hates the way Richie huffs a laugh like it's funny to even consider that he *isn't* a freak, like it's been told to him so much for so long that he actually believes it. Eddie would love to press it, to say 'You're not' but he can't muster up the confidence, not when Richie looks at him with soft, empty eyes. Not when the muscle in his jaw flexes like he's holding back something, fighting against the walls he's built up so high.

“I don’t know what your mom tells you,” Richie sniffs, thumb stroking the corner of his pillow, “But... she’s wrong.”

Those hauntingly magnified eyes stare at him for so long, and Eddie’s throat feels so dry that he thinks he might implode right then and there. He’d love to speak, to say anything, but he realizes embarrassingly that his throat has tightened up with tears that sting in his eyes, so he closes them and nods and prays Richie didn’t see them.

He squeezes his eyes shut tighter when he hears Richie move, and by the time he’s opened them he’s rolled over, leaving Eddie to trace over his neck and knobby spine with phantom fingers.

He prays that when he falls asleep tonight he will wake up tomorrow without the intense need to run gentle fingertips over the swooping juncture of Richie’s neck and shoulders, down over the crease just beneath his shoulder blade to count every one of his ribs.

‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.’

Notes for the Chapter:

BEV!! WOOHOO!

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie really likes him, and it had never been more evident than it was last night. He'd found a lot of boys pretty, like River Phoenix and Judd Nelson. Boys were pretty, especially Eddie. But he'd never felt his heart ache for another boy the way it had for Eddie.

Notes for the Chapter:

Heyo! So, I wanted to clarify: Charlie Howard is the real-life story that Adrian Mellon's death was based on. Charlie Howard died very similarly, but his death occurred in Bangor, Maine in 1984, making this perfect timing for this story. I hope it isn't insensitive or glorifying a brutal death in any way. I encourage you to read about him and remember to always stand up when you see an injustice being done.

Also, gosh I hope this chapter is good. It's the longest one yet, and I had so much I wanted to pack in here that I feel it ended up a bit convoluted. I dunno, I hope it's legible.

Richie's awake, but he doesn't open his eyes. It feels so good to wake up without the help of a loud RA pounding on the door. The sound of Eddie yawning greets his ears, and he can feel him stretch out, his knuckles bumping into Richie's nose.

"Sorry," He whispers, though he doesn't even know that Richie is awake. Keeping his eyes shut still, his sleepy face stretches into a giggly smile. He hears Eddie's throat click as he swallows, "Good morning," He says, sounding strangely quiet and calm. Richie is used to a curt greeting when Eddie shuffles out of bed, he's long since learned that he's *not* a morning person, no matter how much he'd like to be. He's a night owl, like Richie, which is why he had come with him on this little adventure in the first place.

His eyes finally split open like they'd been glued shut overnight, feeling dry and tired. He's welcomed with the blurry face of Eddie-wide-eyed and curious, studying Richie like he's a sight that's never been seen before.

They're curled towards each other, like a set of parentheses, faces and ankles nearly touching, backs bowed out.

"Top o' the morning to ya," Richie says in a silly whisper, tipping the brim of his imaginary hat to Eddie. His lips turn down into a pout, the one he always does when he finds Richie funny but doesn't want to laugh. It makes Richie just as happy to see that face as it does to hear him laugh.

"Pancakes!" Bev exclaims loudly from her spot on the floor, startling poor Eddie so badly he sits bolt upright in bed. He groans when he realizes it's only Bev and rubs his forehead with his hand.

"Shouldn't we stay quiet?" He maintains a whisper, dropping his hand from his head and looking between Bev and Richie, "Your Aunt is probably home by now, right?"

"No, she comes home after work and sleeps for about an hour- if she can- and heads straight to her middle-aged ladies book club," Bev, who Richie has to roll over to see, sticks her tongue out at the idea, "She's an insomniac, so she keeps herself busy, busy, busy."

"She's a vampire," Richie says just to annoy Bev. Her Aunt has long, straight black hair, always chooses to wear a blood-red color, and is pure *evil* (really, she's just kind of uptight, but where's the fun in that?). So yeah, it's been a running joke that she's a vampire for years.

A pillow is thrown to his face by *both* Eddie and Bev, and he's beginning to think that introducing the two of them was a bad idea.

Pancakes sizzle on the stove as Bev cooks them. She's home alone most of the time, so her cooking skills have developed much better

than Richie's, considering everything is made for him when he's in school and when he's back at home he just eats ramen and canned soup.

Eddie had tried to assist her, but he was more of a hindrance than a help, so eventually Bev kicked him out and he sat next to Richie on the countertop, shoving him off every time Richie tried to use his shoulder as an armrest. After a long while of bickering, he settled on resting his arm just behind Eddie's back, almost close enough to touch but not quite. Eddie didn't push him away.

Bev, on the other hand, was looking at him over her shoulder every few minutes, watching intently. Squeamish under her gaze, he pulled himself away from Eddie to set the table. As far as Bev knew, he was straight. She knew about all the bullying and all the names, but she didn't know that they're all true. Every time the words were almost out of his mouth, almost out in the air, he chickened out and stopped himself. But she was observant and cunning, and Richie thought sometimes maybe she knew. Miss Beverly Marsh, beautiful and badass and amazing, is like a sister to him, like the best sister he could ever wish for. She loves him and takes care of him and worries about him, and he does the same for her to the best of his ability. But, as much as they love each other, as close as they are, there must be a line somewhere.

And as much as he'd like to believe that this isn't the line, he can't take any chances. He can't lose the only person he truly has. Maybe if he lived in San Francisco or New York City, maybe then he could take some chances. But not here, not in Bangor. Not here.

In 1984, when Richie was just eight years old, he overheard a couple of adults just outside of the arcade downtown pointing over at a bridge and talking in hushed voices.

“—tossed him over the bridge.”

“He drowned.”

“—did it because he was queer.”

“Just a couple of—”

And little Richie had covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut. That conversation had stuck with him, even if he naively hadn't known why it bothered him so much. The boy they killed was a 23-year-old gay man, his name was Charlie Howard and he was simply walking home with a friend. The boys who killed him were younger than Richie, just driving around town looking for someone to pick on.

As Richie grew older, he realized the place he lived was not a safe one for people like him, and no one was to be trusted.

Not even Bev.

"Move, pumpkin," Bev shoulders him out of the way, setting a plate of blueberry pancakes on the table. Richie makes a big show of pulling out Eddie's chair, bowing and grabbing onto his hand. Eddie rolls his eyes but surprises Richie by doing a giggly curtsy in return.

"Bev makes the best pancakes in the world, Eds."

Beverly flicks him on the back of his head, "Don't oversell it," She grumbles, then turns to Eddie, "They're mediocre at best."

"They're delicious," Eddie tells her after taking a bite, "He wasn't overselling it."

They gather around the table with their stacks of pancakes and dig in.

"So we taped pictures from all my dad's porno magazines on the passenger side of his car--"

"And the numbnuts drove all the way to work with it looking like that! Can you believe it?" Beverly laughs so hard she starts to choke on her orange juice while recounting the memory. It was one of Richie's best pranks ever, and the best part was that his dad never got around to grounding him for it because Richie was in boarding school- making grounding him a pretty tricky task. By the time he was out of school for summer, his dad had forgotten all about how mad he was about the prank that he never did anything about it.

"That's fucking amazing," Eddie says, pushing the last piece of his pancake around the plate, "And really disgusting. You two are gross," He points his fork between Bev and Richie but the amusement clearly showcased on his face says otherwise.

"That's not what your mother was saying-"

His dumb comeback is interrupted by the front door swinging open, exposing them all to the cold air and Bev's Aunt who stares at them from behind her wireframes. Bev gapes like a fish, looking back and forth between the clock on the microwave and the woman standing before her.

"You're having friends over, I see?" She says as she shrugs off her light coat. From the way she says it, no one would guess she was upset, but Richie knows better. Richie knows that silent anger is her best weapon.

Bev is standing by now, awkwardly trying to think of a way to explain away the boys sitting in the kitchen.

"Yes," Bev answers shakily, eyes following her Aunt as she hangs the coat up in the hall closet. Her black hair hangs in pin-straight curtains around her shoulders, much too long for a 'woman of her age' as Richie's mother would say.

"Without my permission?" The only sign of any emotion on her face is a single raised eyebrow. Richie thinks that's scarier than outright anger.

"Sorry, Auntie," Bev answers.

"It was all me, anyway, Mrs. Marsh," Richie pipes up, not wanting her to take the fall for him, "I kind of showed up uninvited."

"Oh, Richie," She answers and looks at him as though she just noticed he was there for the first time, "You're not in school. I'd ask if your parents picked you up for the weekend, but I know better than that," If it weren't for the godawful smirk on her face, Richie might think she was simply stating a fact.

"Auntie!" Bev scolds her, and much to Richie's amusement Eddie

stands up straight, face hot and indignant, ready to pounce.

Bev's 'Auntie' stares him down, daring him to open his mouth, "What? It's not *my* fault they don't want him home on the weekends or holidays-

"That's enough!" Bev nearly bellows, lips drawn tight and pursed together. Richie opens his mouth to tell her it's okay, that she doesn't need to start a fistfight with her Aunt over him, but Eddie starts talking before he gets the chance.

"We were just leaving," He says, but his tone is much darker than his words. Richie leans back in his chair further and watches as Eddie politely, but angrily, takes his and Richie's dishes to the sink, scrubs them completely clean, dries them, and returns them to the cabinets. Bev is astonished, watching in silence the entire time, but her Aunt keeps a straight face, "Sorry for the intrusion," Eddie snaps, stomping over to grab Richie's wrist and drag him up out of his chair and practically over the dining table in his haste.

Bev follows after them, "I'm so sorry, she's usually not home until noon. She's usually not like that, I swear. She just thinks Richie is a bad influence which is so unfair because I'm probably a bad influence on him," She lets out a teetering, tight laugh, following Eddie with her eyes as he packs all his stuff back into the bag he brought. When she realizes he's too upset to even listen to her, she turns her attention to Richie, "You didn't deserve that. She's just being a bitch."

Bev's pretty blue eyes search his earnestly, a hand latching around his wrist. She means well, she really does, but Richie doesn't know what to say to make her feel better, "It's alright, Red. She's not wrong, anyway. My parents don't want me around," He shrugs, "I've come to terms with that."

The hand on his wrist squeezes tighter, pulling him down so she can plant a kiss on his cheek, "I'll always want you around, you hear me?"

When Richie nods dumbly, she releases him and helps pack up his bag hurriedly. She shoves the two of them out of the window, waving

and promising to pick up next time he calls if she's not grounded. Richie pulls her in for one last hug because he's never sure when he'll see her next.

When the window shuts and the curtains are drawn, he turns around and finds Eddie leaning back against the sunny fire escape, the sun filtering through his brown hair and casting little golden specks of light all over his freckled face. He's still angry, that much is clear, but *damn* if he's not beautiful in this lighting. And Richie knows he promised himself not to think of Eddie that way, not to think of any boy that way since Connor, but it's so very hard with this particularly stunning boy standing in front of him with the grumpiest scowl and the sweetest doe eyes. He allows himself just a moment to think that, if this were *When Harry Met Sally* or *Sixteen Candles*, this might be where they'd have their first kiss. Or maybe he'd simply brush an eyelash off of Eddie's cheek, a tiny gasp escaping the small boy as a flush rises onto his cheeks.

Whatever it would be, he's not allowed to have it, and the moment is gone as quickly as it came.

"Let's get the fuck outta here," Eddie snips, voice reverberating off of the walls in the alleyway.

"Lead the way, Spaghetti," Richie says and motions casually towards the stairs. He's immediately thrown off by Eddie's hand clasp around his, just as soft and warm as it had been last night. The world teeters as he's dragged down the stairs, stumbling and struggling to keep his bag on his shoulder, "Slow down, will ya?"

"Sorry," Eddie lets go of his hand and Richie immediately regrets saying anything at all, "I'm just so... so *mad*. I mean, who does she think she is? Who does- Who does this *Patrick* asshole think he is? Who do your *parents* think they are?"

"Slow down," Richie repeats with a laugh, "Pick a fight with one person at a time, okay? I think you've done enough today with that *look* you gave Bev's Aunt. I'm surprised she didn't burst into flames on the spot."

Richie's only human, he can't pretend like Eddie being so enraged on

his behalf isn't incredibly flattering. But it's also a bit embarrassing, that Eddie seems to think that Richie needs somebody to fight his battles. Some battles just aren't worth fighting.

Their feet land on the gravelly pavement of the alley with a crunch and Eddie keeps his lips closed. At the mouth of the pathway cars bustle by, ignorant of the boys walking side by side only a few feet away. All the times Richie had made the trek home by himself, whether it was late at night or in the open air of the morning, he always felt like he was invisible. Like he was a ghost wandering down the street, with no one to talk to, no one to see him. People passed him on the sidewalks without so much as a glance, and the windows of cars were too dark, appearing as though there was no one driving them. Richie was alone as he made his way back home, and sometimes that felt nice, but it mostly just made him feel hollow. Like maybe he wasn't real at all, like maybe Bev was the only person who knew he existed. And even then, Bev was too far out of sight for him to be sure *she* was a real person.

But Eddie, walking next to him and regarding him with a curious look on his face, makes him feel seen. If Eddie was the only person who could see him, he doesn't think he'd mind that at all.

"I really like Bev," Eddie says just as they round the corner out of the alley.

Richie whistles, "Do you have a *thing* for my Bev?"

Eddie splutters awkwardly, "No! God, no. No. I like her as a *person*." He clarifies with burning cheeks. With a raised eyebrow, Richie considers if Eddie *does* have a crush on her and is simply embarrassed, or if he really finds Bev *that* revolting.

"Well, she's pretty, isn't she? C'mon, think about it! I could be your brother-in-law, I'd be the Uncle to your kids!" Richie sings the last word, as though that's going to entice Eddie into telling the truth about his crush on Bev.

"She's pretty... yeah. But, I don't know. She's not my type," Eddie shrugs, "I mean, *you're* not dating her and you could be. Why's it so surprising that I don't want to date her?"

Eddie looks defensive, flailing his arms about as he speaks. It's amusing how easy it is to rile him up, and Richie seems to do it better than anybody.

"First of all, I am a two compared to Bev, who's like, a twelve. I definitely would not have a chance with her even if I wanted to date her. Second of all, she's not really... my type, either."

Eddie looks at him strangely, but neither of them asks the other what 'their type' would be.

Instead, Eddie says, "I've never really dated anyone. I haven't even had my first kiss," The wind tosses his hair around as he stares at his feet, "Looks like I won't have it anytime soon, either, being at a boys school and all," Richie watches as he swallows roughly, shakes his hands out like he's trying to dry them off.

"I've already gone all the way with a lady," Richie smirks over at him as Eddie tosses a wide-eyed glance his way.

"Really?" He asks.

"She hasn't told you?" Richie starts, and Eddie is already rolling his eyes before he gets to finish, "My first time was with the beautiful Mrs. K. It was a passionate night of love-making and now-"

Eddie's hand slaps over Richie's mouth to shut him up as quickly as possible. Richie's tongue wiggles in a circle over Eddie's palm and he shrieks.

"Gross! You're like a feral dog!" Wiping his hand on his shorts, he grimaces at Richie.

He doesn't press further, asking Richie '*No really, have you had your first kiss?*' and Richie is thankful because he *has* and it was terrible. He wouldn't even know how to talk about it without cringing.

It was Freshman year, behind the building that a school dance was being held in. After his crush on Connor, he was in the 'denial' stage and thought that maybe if he found a girl to makeout with he'd discover it was all a mistake. So when he'd met Annie Stevens and she'd whispered an invitation to go outside into his ear, he'd easily

complied. This girl, judging from how she kissed, was fairly experienced. She'd planted her lips on his and they were coated in sticky lipgloss that Richie couldn't imagine straight boys liked and she'd kissed him for several minutes before grabbing his hand and putting it on her boob. And that was when he'd flinched so violently that Annie looked at him and said 'You don't want to do this, do you?' and he hadn't said anything, even as she walked back into the dance and probably told all her friends about it.

And Richie doesn't know how to spin that story to make it sound better, or funnier, because it really just sounds sad. So he'd rather Eddie didn't ask.

He and Eddie seem to have that kind of relationship, a 'don't ask, don't tell' kind of relationship. But it's more like 'you can ask, but don't expect an answer'. Eddie always asks, usually when he's angry. He asks but always drops it when Richie doesn't want to answer. Richie, on the other hand, doesn't ask because Eddie seems so easy to push away, and he doesn't want to make the mistake of asking the wrong question. He'd gone through Eddie's medication out of sheer curiosity in the first week of school and had received the silent treatment for 24 hours. He doesn't want to make that mistake again, so he avoids asking questions. The only other time he'd dared to nose into his business was to ask if his mother hurt him, because with the fear in Eddie's eyes whenever he spoke about her, he couldn't *not* ask. What he would have done with that information, he's not sure. He'd like to imagine that he would've kicked Mrs. K's ass, but he's a scrawny sixteen-year-old whose best defense is 'your mom' jokes, so the most he could've done is shout at her until his throat was raw.

He's not sure he likes the answer he did receive, which was that she didn't hurt him physically, only emotionally.

"She makes me feel bad... about myself."

And really, was that that much better than physically hurting him? His voice had sounded so fragile, and fragile was something Eddie was *not*. Eddie was a bit of a scaredy-cat and afraid of every illness under the sun, but he was not as fragile as he thought himself to be. He was loud and smart, unafraid of rising up to meet Richie's smart mouth. Richie admires him not only for how pretty he finds him, but

also for his sharp wit and intelligence and how easily he can stun Richie into silence with a particularly good comeback.

Richie *really* likes him, and it had never been more evident than it was last night. He'd found a lot of boys pretty, like River Phoenix and Judd Nelson. Boys were pretty, especially Eddie. But he'd never felt his heart *ache* for another boy the way it had for Eddie. And it was stupid because they were hardly even *friends*, but boy did his heart ache. Even Connor, who was pretty and funny and smart and had won Richie's heart in a matter of days, had not made his heart throb in his chest like Eddie did last night with his fragile voice and sad eyes. Maybe that was why he had stupidly said '*She's wrong*'. Maybe that was why he stared at him for so long, *too long*. Maybe that was why he let himself imagine that Eddie cared for him in that same way, that his heart ached in his chest, too.

And then tears gathered in Eddie's eyes and he'd nodded, wheezed a little but didn't reach for his inhaler. Richie had never wanted to touch another boy more than he did in that moment, and it was so *cheesy* and so *stupid* because it was something he would never be able to do. If he did, Eddie could hate him. Bev could hate him. He could *die*.

And sometimes he thinks about walking across that bridge where Charlie Howard died, with a shirt on his chest with big letters that say '*I'm gay*' just so they would toss him into the water and he wouldn't have to be afraid anymore. But that is a stupid thought.

By the time they show up to the film club Bill is worried sick. He claims to have searched the entire school grounds for them, but Eddie lies through his teeth and says that he must've just missed them.

He sneaks a sly grin at Richie, a gesture that says '*I covered for you, you're welcome*' and Richie just pulls him into his side in response, ruffling his hair as they stumble to a couple of the desks that have been arranged in a circle, right next to Ben. They're the old-fashioned kind, the kind Richie hates because they're made specifically for right-handed students. Whenever he tries to write with his left hand

on one of these things he has to tilt his paper at an awkward angle and lean half over the desk. Luckily, film club doesn't require any writing.

Mike and Stan wander in and sit on the opposite side of Ben. Richie leans over the front of the desk and asks what they're doing here.

"We come to support Bill when he goes over his script. He's always so proud of it, he likes us to come and hear his ideas," Mike says with a smile. Richie blinks. People actually do that? Just, show up at their friends' club meetings just to show support?

They go over the script, with Bill leading the meeting and talking with more passion than he's ever seen him possess. With all the film club students listening to him intently, it suddenly occurs to him how much of a natural-born leader Bill is. Richie doesn't really understand half of what he's talking about, but he still finds himself inclined to listen.

Somewhere along the way, he feels eyes on him. He turns, sees Eddie staring- not really at *him*, but rather, at his shaking leg. He recalls Eddie asking him to stop during class weeks ago, and though he hasn't asked since, he stops.

"Sorry," He says.

Eddie's face is twisted in a thoughtful expression, lips pursed and one eyebrow crooked up, "No, it's fine."

He elbows Eddie, points at the script he has open to the page they're currently discussing, whispers "I think that's the character Bill has in mind for you."

It's the main part. The film is a comedic horror story, which Richie thinks could use a little tweaking on the 'comedic' part. But, the main character is this absolute firecracker with hilarious one-liners and more bravery in his pinky finger than Richie has in his whole body. If Bill *isn't* considering Eddie for that part, then he's an idiot.

"No way, the main part?" Eddie looks over at him, unimpressed, but Richie nods, "I have no acting experience, I'm not funny, and I do *not*

have the face of a leading man.”

“Okay, listen,” He says, voice still a whisper to avoid drawing attention to them, “First of all, no, you don’t have any acting experience. You’re right. But, this is just a fun high school film club! It’s not being entered in any film festivals. Second, you are definitely funny- in that dry humor sort of way. Lastly, that face of yours makes my heart *swoon*, Eds!” He pinches at Eddie’s cheek, not at all surprised with the hand that immediately slaps him away.

He giggles, turns back around, and once again feels eyes on him. Only this time, it’s Stan. When Richie turns to stick his tongue out at him, he’s so startled by the look on Stan’s face his blood turns to ice. Because Stan is looking at him like he’s transparent, it’s the look a veteran detective would give a suspect at the moment he realizes that he’s caught them red-handed- Stan looks at Richie like he *knows*. His heart starts to thud in his ears, he feels hot and cold all over. He’s being too obvious, touching another boy like that. He should’ve stayed away from Eddie, stuck to eating meals all by himself. He should have never brought him to Bev’s house because now he’s broadcasting his stupid crush for the whole world to see.

Richie avoids looking at both Stan and Eddie for the rest of the meeting.

After the meeting is over Eddie excuses himself to do some studying in the library, which Richie tells him is ‘*lame, lame, lame,*’ and Bill offers to join him. Ben heads out to the courtyard with some of the other drama students, and Mike and Stan disappear before Richie can even notice he’s alone in the now empty classroom.

When Richie’s alone, he just can’t stop thinking.

His brain is like a frog jumping from thought to thought anxiously, bouncing from homework to Bev to Mr. Bitters to Christmas plans to how Stan was staring at him earlier. And that’s where it sticks- Stan.

Usually, at some point, when his brain is alone with itself- as it so

often is- it collapses in on itself. He spirals when he becomes stuck on a subject, so entrenched in it he can't find it in himself to sleep, eat, or even move. He hates that feeling, that deadlock, but he can't stop thinking about Stan's face and what did it *mean* and maybe if he just goes and talks to him he can get a better read on what that look meant.

So off he goes.

He decides to head back to the dorms, where he's most likely to find him, and sure enough he sees both him and Mike heading up the stairs. Richie follows close behind, calling out their names. He's not sure what his plan is- to crack a joke about it all and hope Stan forgets about it? To bribe him not to say anything?

This is stupid, he thinks, not for the first time but he carries on anyway.

He watches them round the corner of the hall, but they don't seem to hear him calling out for them. They don't turn around, not even once, eventually disappearing into Stan and Bill's room, with Richie only a few yards behind them. He weaves his way through the crowd easily, being over six feet tall makes him like a monster truck among a sea of Volkswagen Beetles.

Once he brings himself to the door, he pushes it open without another thought.

Not his best decision.

Stan is wedged against the wall to Richie's immediate left, Mike's body pressed against his firmly. Stan's hands are on his waist, stroking up and down and one leg is hooked over the back of Mike's. They're kissing.

Well, they *were*.

Now, they're both staring at him, eyes wide and mouths hanging open, and Richie's looking back at them with the same expression. He waits several seconds before he realizes that anyone passing by in the hall could see them and he slams the door shut before either of them

can ask him to.

“Richie-” Mike starts at the same time Stan says “Oh, fuck.”

“Mike, oh my God,” Stan says, looking back at him and unhooking his leg. He starts to shake so hard he looks like a leaf rattling in the wind. Mike tries to comfort him by holding gently onto his arms, thumbs stroking skin in an automated way, but he doesn’t move his eyes away from Richie.

“Richie, man, please don’t tell anyone about this,” He pleads. Richie can’t move. He thinks he might be hyperventilating and distantly wishes for Eddie’s inhaler. He can’t talk. He shakes his head as a way to communicate that no, he wouldn’t dare tell anyone about it, ever.

It doesn’t seem to have the desired calming effect. Stan starts to cry, just little hiccupy sobs that he’s trying to stifle, “Richie please,” Mike repeats, “Please. You can’t tell anyone about this,” He sounds like he’s begging for his life, and he is, in a way, Richie supposes. Because if this were to get out, they’d be dead men. He thinks about Charlie Howard for a fraction of a second.

“I won’t. No, oh my God, I would never,” He surges forward, then, to wrap his hand around Stan’s bicep and pull his hand away from where it’s gradually moved to pulling on his hair, “Stan, please stop crying. I won’t tell anyone. I mean, come on, who would believe a word out of the Trashmouth anyway?” He catches a glimpse of Stan’s face, all pale and trembling, splotches of red around his eyes, and his heart drops to his stomach. How long had they been hiding in fear?

Stan looks over at him, sniffs, says, “You won’t tell anybody?” He pauses and sniffs again, “Why?”

Mike seems just as confused, watching Richie close to see his reaction, “Because you’re my friends. And- And I’m *happy* for you guys. And I’m not an idiot, I know what would happen if anybody found out,” He blinks at Mike, who has started to smile, “The world can’t afford to lose a couple as sexy as this! Bangor may not appreciate it, but I sure do,” He punctuates his comments with a flirtatious wink and much to his surprise, Stan lets out a wet laugh into his hand. Then, he pulls Richie into a more bone-crushing hug

than any of the ones Bev has ever given him.

"Thank you," He says into Richie's ear, and Mike is suddenly hugging both of them too, squeezing so tight Richie thinks he might not be breathing anymore. He's breathless but beaming nonetheless, so happy that it was him who found them in this compromising position and not another student, or- he thinks with a shudder- *Hockstetter*.

"Nobody else knows?" He asks once they've all broken apart, watching Stan as he tries to wipe away all the tears on his cheeks.

"No," Mike answers, "It's not easy to trust anyone. Even Ben," He sighs heavily, exasperated, "Even him, the nicest guy on earth, I can't trust."

Stan latches onto his hand sympathetically, eyes finding Richie's, "No one can know, seriously. Not even a joke. Do you hear me?"

Richie nods, though he feels a little claustrophobic under the weight of this secret. He already has one big, looming secret in his life, but being trusted with the weight of someone else's? "You guys should really lock the door if you're going to do that, though," His tone is light, but he lowers his voice as he adds, "There are a lot of other people who could've walked in besides me."

"We were *about* to," Stan narrows his eyes at him, "Why did you walk in here anyway?"

"Oh, um," Richie looks over at Mike awkwardly, "I wanted to ask what was up with you at the club meeting today."

"What was *up* with me?" Stan repeats just as Mike says, "Something was up with you today?"

"Well, you kept looking at me funny. I mean, you always do, but this was like... different," He shuffles on his feet, bounces on his toes, then blurts, "Nevermind, it seems stupid now."

There are a million reasons to not bring it up now, ranging from Mike's curious gaze to Stan's bloodshot eyes.

And Stan looks at him again, with that oddly omniscient look that

he's only ever seen on Bev, like he's figured something out. It makes Richie's skin squirm so he ducks his head and looks away.

"Okay," Stan says slowly, and Richie can still *feel* that look. He taps his foot rhythmically against the carpeted floor, "Thank you," Stan says once more, pulling him into a side hug, "Now get the fuck out of my room, I have unfinished business."

Before Richie can even scramble out of the room, Mike is already pulling Stan in for another kiss.

Dinner isn't as awkward as Richie feared it would be. It's not that difficult to keep his mouth shut, he discovers, because Stan and Mike have *always* been close. They've always sat next to each other and always exchanged little looks, so knowing that they're dating doesn't change how Richie views them at all. They're just Stan and Mike, just like he's 'just Richie'.

He wishes it could be that simple for everyone else, too.

After dinner, up in his room, he takes a shower (without Hockstetter around, phew) and waits for Eddie up in the dorm. He'd gone back to the library after dinner once more, likely for the same project he had been working on before, and promised to be back ten minutes before lights out.

Sure enough, ten minutes before lights out, Eddie walks into the room and tosses a book at him.

"What's this?" Richie asks without looking at the cover, opting to look at Eddie instead. Eddie pushes his legs out of his way on the bed so he can sit down next to Richie, both of them pressed against the headboard on the small twin bed.

"Read it, dumbfuck," Eddie answers while pulling his knees up to his chest. Richie looks at the shiny, laminated cover of the book in his hands. *Driven To Distraction* it reads, and then, below that in smaller

letters: *Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder from Childhood through Adulthood*.

“What?” He asks stupidly, unsure what to make of this.

“Don’t be mad,” Eddie says quickly, taking the book out of his hands and thumbing to a dog eared page, “I could be wrong. But, I’ve just been watching you do that leg-shaking thing for weeks now. And I remembered reading about the behaviors of children with ADHD on a pamphlet in the doctors’ office, and one of them is this inability to sit still. So I went down to the library to read more on it, and this is the best book I could find,” Richie looks at him with big eyes, stuck in some sort of shock. No one- *No one* had ever even suggested the *possibility* that he could have something like this. No one had ever even paid close enough attention to him to notice.

Eddie leans in closer while glancing at him nervously, holding the book in between the two of them to show him the page, “Here, um,” He taps at one of the bullet points, “Like this one, I called your name three times when you were sitting right next to me at dinner before you actually heard me, and-” He smiles at the bullet point ‘*may talk excessively*’, “That could just be because you’re outgoing but, I don’t know. I have a feeling it’s something more, too.”

Richie wishes he was ‘talking excessively’ right now, or just *talking* at all, but he can’t seem to make words come out of his mouth, and Eddie has no choice but to continue speaking, “It’s not a bad thing. A lot of these things are just... *you*. You wouldn’t be Richie if you *didn’t* talk excessively, as fucking annoying as it is,” He rolls his eyes for good measure, closing the book and placing it into Richie’s hands.

Richie’s throat closes up out of the blue. He subtly rubs his eyes under his glasses and swallows to make the stupid lump go away. Why is he getting so emotional? It’s just a stupid book. But it explains so much. For the first time in his life, he feels a pang of sympathy for his six-year-old self, trying to follow his mother’s instructions for pumpkin carving but getting carried away and ending up spending the whole night in his room in a time out. Or when he was nine and was sent off to boarding school on a scholarship because he was smart but ‘too much to handle’ as he’d overheard his mom tell his Aunt as she was packing Richie’s stuff in grocery bags.

Maybe that was why he could never concentrate without shaking his leg, or why he was always shushed for asking too many questions in class. Maybe that was why he was sometimes too much to handle, why his brain couldn't stop running no matter how many times he asked it to.

"Are you mad?" Eddie looks at him anxiously.

"Mad?" Richie scoffs and runs his thumb over the edge of the book, "You've cracked the code I didn't even know I had," They both laugh and Eddie lets out a sigh of relief.

What can he even say to this? Eddie took the time to go to the fucking library and read for several hours- assuming that is what he'd been doing the *whole* time he was down there- and he'd done it all for Richie, to help him, to find him a book that might help him cope with his misbehaving brain.

"Could you read a few chapters to me?" He asks, placing it back into Eddie's hands.

There's something when he says it- Richie can't put his finger on it- but something changes in Eddie's eyes. They go slightly bigger, slightly softer. His mouth opens a smidge, parting just enough to show rows of pearly teeth and when his tongue reaches out to lick at his lower lip Richie has to physically hold himself back from kissing him.

"Sure," He says sweetly, pressing himself even closer to Richie until they're lined up ankle to shoulder, flipping the book open to the first chapter.

He begins reading with his head crookedly laying on Richie's shoulder. It's incredibly easy to listen when it's Eddie's voice reading out the words; he doesn't ask him to stop shaking his leg or rolling the duvet between his fingers once. They just exist, side by side, eyes skimming the pages in front of them as they relax into the body heat of one another. When lights out is called, Eddie turns off the lamp and uses a mini flashlight in its place. Richie only melts further into his side, knowing nobody is around to watch him and he's safe to be as affectionate with Eddie as he will allow.

As easy as it is to listen to Eddie's voice, it's even easier to doze off to the hum of it. It seems the more he struggles against sleep, the deeper he falls into it, and he's fast asleep at the end of chapter three.

Even if his eyes were open, he probably wouldn't have been able to see the flush rising on Eddie's cheeks in the pale moonlight.

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

Tender fingers squeeze at the cloth over his shoulder and Richie leans close, presses his nose against Eddie's temple in some sort of slow half-hug before pulling away to look back at the path in front of them.

I love him, I love him, I love him.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm back with a pretty brief chapter, sorry! I think the next one will be longer, this one was definitely kind of a filler. I hope it's still enjoyable and I feel it was necessary to further their relationship and love for each other. Anyway, I'm rambling, forgive me.

“Richie?”

Silence.

“Rich? Are you asleep?”

Silence.

Eddie looks around the bedroom and tries to figure out how to maneuver himself out from under Richie. He can feel the sleep-heavy weight of Richie's head pressed on top of his own, which is resting on Richie's shoulder. One of Richie's arms is resting haphazardly resting on Eddie's thigh and *fuck*, if it isn't making his heart race.

Shifting uncomfortably, Eddie tries sliding out of the bed, but Richie's body only follows him as he goes. He pushes himself and Richie back upright.

Maybe he could just sleep here? It's kind of like sleeping on a plane, right? Plus, Richie's shoulder isn't the *most* uncomfortable pillow, though it is a little boney. In a few hours, when Richie's a bit more

rested, he can wake him up and move back to his own bed. It's not weird for friends to fall asleep this way, right? No. It's totally not weird.

But maybe that's just the drowsiness talking.

Richie never treats it like it's weird, so Eddie doesn't let himself think it's weird. Of course, it *is* a little weird, considering he has this odd infatuation with him, but Richie doesn't know that. He has no idea that his roommate has a massive crush on him, that Eddie's heart flutters when he takes his glasses off at night or laughs at his own joke, loud and beautiful. He has no idea. Eddie can only hope it stays that way.

It doesn't help that they're such close friends. They went from strangers to best friends in only a few weeks and they're ridiculously close. They're almost always touching, usually pressed against each other at their cafeteria table or sitting side by side on the bed chatting about one thing or another. Richie still seems to be catching up to the fact that they're friends, always surprised when Eddie invites him somewhere. Eddie invites him *everywhere*. There's not a moment that they're not hanging out with each other, especially now that Eddie has agreed to do Bill's movie. It *may* have had something to do with Richie constantly telling him how good he'll look on the 'big screen' (AKA the mobile projector the film club uses to watch their movies). They've only had two meetings since, which has been a lot of Bill helping Eddie get more comfortable in front of a camera. Next week, though, is when they'll begin filming. Eddie clutches at his inhaler anytime he thinks too much about it.

Richie's always there though, telling him he's going to be great and giving him a wet willie anytime he's wearing his 'thinking face' (as Richie calls it) too long for Richie's liking.

Things are... *good*. Eddie is really, really happy. He tries not to sound too enthusiastic about his time at school when he calls his mom on Wednesdays, worried that if he sounds like he's enjoying his time away from her too much she'll snatch him up and keep him home

forever.

When he's *not* on the phone with his mom, though, he's laughing so hard his ribs get tough, his cheeks hurt after talking to Richie for hours in their dorm room, and he allows himself to enjoy the butterflies he feels when Richie touches him- though he knows he can never, ever show it.

It feels like a bit of an 'F U' to his mother, crushing on Richie this hard. There are so many things she told him he could never do, like run or join sports teams or climb trees. Above all of it, she'd constantly been yammering in his ear about AIDS and 'boys who *like* other boys' and tapping the side of his face to make sure he paid close attention to any sermons about 'that *thing*'. Eddie realizes she must have always known. She must have always had an inkling that Eddie, with his 'delicate' personality and wandering eye, was likely harvesting little crushes on boys. Little infatuations with boys jawlines and lips. Little heart flutters that he hadn't even known the meaning of for so long. And she'd tried to *crush* it under her heel.

It's haunting, in hindsight, how much she's tried to quash who he is, break it down into manageable pieces. She'd made him docile and weak, but with his friends- with *Richie*- he was loud and commanding and funny. And the best part was, they *loved* it. Richie especially, but even the others loved it. Ben called him their 'protector', Bill told him the main character of his film was a good fit for him because he was 'bold' and 'brave'. Mike came to him for help with handling problems and Stan referred to him as 'strong' instead of 'bossy' or 'petulant' like his mother did. And Richie, whenever Eddie snapped at him for something or told him off he would always pinch Eddie's cheek with a big grin and say 'you're always looking out for me'.

Eddie felt more loved with them than he ever had with his mother.

This was why, surrounded by all this love, it was so easy to fall in love with Richie Tozier. So fucking *easy*.

Sure, he's only sixteen and has very few examples of what love is really supposed to be like. But he knows, with absolute certainty, that the feeling he has for Richie is not one people stumble upon very often. He knows, with *absolute* certainty, that to still want to spend

time with Richie after all the crude jokes and wet willies, he must really, *really* love him.

He knows it now, too, as Richie tugs off his uniform white shirt and smiles wide, the sun gleaming on his pearly, crooked teeth. He knows it as he screams, loud and boyish, and jumps into the Quarry. He knows it as Richie wraps a towel around Eddie's shaking shoulders as he bitches about hypothermia, listening intently and only piping up every once in a while to get in a good-natured joke.

He knows, he knows, he knows.

With Richie's charming personality, he'd managed to convince everyone, including Stan, to leave the school after class for a dip (a very, very brief dip in the near-freezing weather) in the Quarry. If the school ever cracked down on their security, Eddie would be sorely disappointed. Because this, jumping into ice-cold water in early November just to immediately bundle up into puffer jackets and thick socks, is one of the best experiences Eddie has ever had.

Even better, is hearing the screaming whoop of Bev as she tumbles down, over the cliff edge, into the water. And even better than that, is the jaws of both Bill and Ben dropping as she clambers out of the water, dripping in only a t-shirt and her underwear.

"You didn't toss any clothes down to the embankment!" Richie says immediately, standing up from his spot next to Eddie, looking like an idiot in damp jeans and a big, puffy, red jacket, "You're going to freeze to death, Marsh!"

"I wanted to surprise you!" She calls back, opening her arms for a hug but thinking better of it when she sees that Richie is mostly dry, "I left my change of clothes up at the top of the cliff."

They all march back up to the top of the cliff and Eddie has to stop himself from laughing out loud at how ridiculous Bill and Ben look as Bev towels off and changes her shirt unabashedly.

"I'm Bev, by the way," She says as she finishes tugging on her puffer jacket. The boys all go around and introduce themselves. Eddie smiles when she pulls him in for a hug, "*Richie's* Eddie," She teases.

Eddie flushes in remembrance of Richie introducing him as ‘his Eddie’, “How are you?”

“Wait, you two know each other?” Stan asks, eyeing the two of them suspiciously. Richie pays no mind to the conversation at hand, several yards away in the direction of the school and hollering for them to follow.

“Um,” Eddie starts shyly as everyone ambles after Richie, “Richie and I *might* have snuck out a few weeks ago to visit her,” He grins as Mike and Bill’s eyes go wide at the thought of Eddie breaking rules, as though he isn’t in the process of breaking rules right now. Bev and Ben, on the other hand, are distracted, immersed in a conversation of their own. Eddie shrugs at their shocked faces and speeds up a bit to link his arm with Richie’s.

“Well, hey there, Spaghetti,” Richie says cheerily, nose and cheeks red from the cold wind on his damp skin. His arm disconnects from Eddie’s to slide up and over his shoulders. The warmth and weight of it makes Eddie shiver, “Are you cold?”

Richie goes to shuck off his jacket, “No, Rich, I’m fine. You’ll be cold.”

“Fine, fine. I was just trying to be a gentleman, Eds, forgive me,” Richie holds his hands up in cheeky surrender, putting his arm back around Eddie’s shoulders and tugging him so close that their hips bump against each other.

“Don’t call me Eds,” Eddie snips. Richie looks over at him, tongue wiggling between his teeth as his flushed cheeks dimple with joy. His eyes brighten with a fondness that Eddie has never had directed at him before. Tender fingers squeeze at the cloth over his shoulder and Richie leans close, presses his nose against Eddie’s temple in some sort of slow half-hug before pulling away to look back at the path in front of them.

I love him, I love him, I love him.

It seems as though once he admits it to himself, the love that he feels for Richie, everything tumbles down after that. Had he not been Richie's roommate, had he not been so close to his face to clean the cut on his forehead, had he not slept in the same bed as him *twice*, maybe he wouldn't have fallen in love. Maybe if Richie hadn't asked him to read to him in that soft, quiet voice with this big, hopeful eyes, he wouldn't have teetered over the line between friendship and romance.

But now that he's crossed it, there's no going back. There's no saying 'no' to Richie.

Maybe that's why, when Richie timidly asks if he's still awake twenty minutes after lights out- *just* as he's about to tumble into sleep- he answers truthfully.

His eyes creep open to the sweet, grey moonlight shining over Richie's face. His eyes sparkle brightly with no glasses to hide behind.

"Do you ever feel like the entire world is out to get you?" He asks, head turning to look away towards the door. The question is so odd, so out-of-character that Eddie jostles himself upright, "Because I do. I feel like the whole world is out to get me," He jerks his gaze back to Eddie sharply, "Tell me to stop hosting a pity-party for myself."

He sounds honest. Like he really needs to hear it from someone else that he should swallow down all the shitty things that have happened to him. And Eddie knows that it's so hypocritical- when he will hardly open up about any of the terrible things his mother does to him- but he shakes his head anyway.

"With the way our parents have treated us, I think we deserve to host a pity-party for ourselves," Eddie's feet are on the ground before he can think of what he's doing, "Sorry I didn't bring any cake, though."

Richie grins but it's not as wide and devilish as normal. Eddie wanders across the room and is surprised when Richie moves across the mattress without Eddie having to say a word. Eddie blinks, stares at the space Richie has made.

"I'm sorry, I thought you-" Richie starts but Eddie settles down into

the empty space on the bed before he can finish.

His breathing stutters in his chest as he stares across the darkness at Richie- so close to him, all freckled and dimpled and wonderful. Richie reaches towards the nightstand where Eddie's inhaler is but he stops him.

"I don't need it, I'm fine," Eddie smiles and it's immediately returned, the hand Richie had reached out with settling into the small gap between them.

I love him, I love him, I love him.

"Thanks for joining the pity party," Richie smiles dopily.

"Seems like a cool party," Eddie whispers.

"No cake and no booze, it's actually pretty lame," Richie pushes a hand through his hair with a small hum.

"Eh," Eddie shrugs, "I think any party with you is pretty cool," It's so cheesy, but it makes Richie's smile grow even bigger, so it's worth it.

Richie adjusts the blankets around them and regards Eddie with a tender gaze that Eddie still hasn't adjusted to. He supposes it's the same gaze Stan or Bill gives him, but he knows that there's something different to it.

Sometimes it feels like maybe Richie feels it, too.

Times like this, where their bare arms are pressed against each other and their fingers dance with one another like they're almost about to hold hands, he thinks that maybe Richie thinks about how beautiful he is in the moonlight, too.

But that thought is as gone as soon as it came, as Richie rolls over in the bed to go to sleep. This is not how the world works, not how *his* world works. Boys don't love each other. Boys can't love each other. *No*, Eddie thinks, *boys can love each other, but boys who love boys will never be loved back.*

Richie sucks in a deep inhale, the ridge of his ribs rising with the air,

and Eddie runs his eyes over every individual one. He counts them, over and over and over, because one is missing. He thinks, distantly, that it must have been given away. And he sends a little prayer in vain to anything that might be out there, that it was him it was given away to.

Genesis 2:22

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

"A boy who likes boys is a dead boy"

-Richard Siken

But maybe it doesn't always have to be that way.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is the longest chapter so far! I really didn't mean for it to get so long, but I decided to add some surprise POVs and I hope it reads well. It's late because I reread it like a million times, rewriting parts and adding stuff constantly, so it's probably a convoluted mess at this point. I just really, really hope you guys like it.

It's Saturday afternoon, which means it's been a little under two days since Richie and Eddie fell asleep in bed together. Which means it's been a little under two days since Richie started to lose his shit.

They shared a bed once before this a few weeks ago, but that had only been because Richie trapped Eddie underneath his body weight. This time, though, it was a conscious decision on both parts. They were both a little sleepy, a little giggly, and they fell asleep with their backs pressed against each other.

Then he woke up and Eddie's head was uncomfortably stuck just under the nook of Richie's arm, snoring loudly but looking intriguingly pretty with his lips parted and long eyelashes resting just above his cheekbones. Richie worried that his heart was beating loud enough to wake Eddie up.

Richie has had lots of crushes on boys. Connor wasn't the only one, just the most notable. There were the little crushes on boys he saw in passing, then the bigger ones on his project partners and the one boy who sat in front of him and always giggled at his jokes.

But this, *holy shit*. This pretty boy with a sharp mouth and absolutely zero tolerance for Richie's bullshit has stolen his entire heart and he doesn't even know it. It's unlike anything he's ever felt before, it's a magnetic force that keeps drawing him in even though he's terrified of getting closer.

And as much as he knows he should run far, far away, he just can't make himself do it.

"Richhhiiiiieeee Toziiiierrr!" A sweet voice hollers behind him, a force hitting his back *hard*, short legs wrapping around his waist upon impact. Richie wraps his hands under the pinstripe-clad thighs like it's second nature, hair shaking from the movement of hoisting them up further on his waist, "It's filming day," Eddie says, much quieter and directly into his ear.

Richie cranes his neck to look at him but is stopped when Eddie touches his forehead against Richie's shoulder sweetly, "I'm nervous," Eddie whispers once more, but there's a smile surrounding the words. He and Eddie had spoken about this the night before, how they're both nervous but excited. It surprises Richie how jittery Eddie gets when he's excited. It brings out a side of him that's a little less snippy, a little louder and a lot sweeter. Not that Richie doesn't like Eddie when he's snippy- he's actually afraid of just how *much* he likes it- but he also loves sweet and loud Eddie who wrestles with him and loves piggyback rides.

"I know, but you're going to kill it, Spaghetti," Richie says to the side of his face. They're standing in the room the Film Club is gathering in before they will set out to film a few scenes around the school. There are only a few students in the classroom because they're both a bit early, but none of them bat an eye at Eddie and Richie's unusual behavior. This is a normal occurrence for anyone who knows them well enough, which the Film Club does.

"Promise you'll be honest with me and tell me when I'm not doing well?" Eddie asks, turning his face to the side and pressing his cheek against Richie's shoulder. One of the hands that had been limply wrapped around Richie's biceps wriggles out and shoves a pinky into his face. Richie releases one of Eddie's thighs to wrap his own pinky around the one extended to him.

“I promise, but you’re going to do great,” Richie says, releasing Eddie to let him slide onto the ground.

Eddie crosses in front of him, leaning against the whiteboard in the classroom as sun filters in from the window across the room. It hits him like refracted glass and he gleams in Richie’s direction, sunny, tan, and freckled. They share a smile.

Richie’s skin itches with the need to be closer.

The scene they’re filming takes place in the basement of Building C, a smelly, damp room with extremely dim lighting- which is exactly how Bill wants it to look. It’s supposed to be about a quarter of the way into the film when everything starts to get ominous. Richie hasn’t really paid super close attention to the script aside from all the scenes he’s helped Eddie practice, but Bill is a pretty decent writer. The movie is equal parts scary and funny, with Eddie as the snarky, sarcastic main character. It was the best casting choice ever, obviously.

Bill is a bit pretentious about the whole thing, saying stuff like ‘action’ instead of ‘go’ and ‘cut’ instead of ‘stop’ like they’re filming a *real* movie. He goes from a fun leader to a serious, hard-working director, which is fine- but Richie can tell it’s making Eddie nervous. Every time Bill gives him notes on his performance he doesn’t do the ‘shit sandwich’ like Richie’s mom always told him to do. You know, *nice stuff first, all the bad shit, then some nice stuff afterward*. Instead, he just gives him all criticism and no encouragement, which isn’t terrible. Eddie doesn’t like to be lied to and treated like he’s fragile, he likes to be told how it is. But he’s doing a *great job*, and Bill hasn’t mentioned it once. It’s freaking Eddie out because he thinks he’s doing nothing but fucking it all up.

Richie, who is one of the cameramen (and he does a damn good job if you ask him), takes it upon himself to yell goofy encouragements after every stoic ‘*CUT!*’ from Bill. He wolf-whistles every time they do a close up on Eddie’s face, which always makes him turn bright red and it’s *incredibly* endearing.

It's still not helping.

Eddie- slowly but surely- is becoming very tightly wound. Richie watches him like a balloon filling with air and hopes that he won't pop before they're done filming. Bill doesn't seem to notice, and it's not really *his* fault anyway. He loves Eddie, and vice versa, that much is clear. He's just a stoic badass when he's in the director's chair (or, in this case, a broken desk chair). Richie would say something to Bill, but he doesn't want anyone to overhear and embarrass Eddie in the process, so he keeps his lips sealed.

It's gross in that dingy little basement, cobwebs and disturbingly green puddles of water. It works great for a horror movie, but not for an asthmatic kid with a tendency to freak out anytime there's even the slightest *hint* of danger in the air.

They are filming a shot up the stairs of the basement. It's just a simple shot of Eddie running up the stairs and it should only take a few minutes to shoot, but Eddie trips on his way up. He stumbles, his knee landing on the step below him, and tries to catch himself with his hands. It would have been fine if a rusty nail weren't poking up from the stairs that cuts a gnarly hole into his hands.

He promptly freaks the fuck out.

"Oh my God, oh fuck. I cut my hand on a nail," Richie can't quite see Eddie's face from the angle of the stairs, but he can hear the hysterical tone in his voice.

"Shit, cuh-cut!" Bill says, immediately moving in the direction of the stairs, but Richie beats him to it.

"Let me see, Eds," He pulls on Eddie's palm that he's now cradling to his chest, hissing at the trickle of blood pouring out of the wound. It's admittedly pretty deep and quite gory.

"Don't touch it, who knows what nasty shit is on your hands that you *self-admittedly* never wash," Eddie groans, snatching his hand back, "I n-need to go to the nurse, Rich. There are so many diseases that can be transmitted through a rusty nail! I mean, look around, it's disgusting in here! I could die, oh my God, I could die," Eddie's

throat starts to close up and whistle, which Richie- in any other situation- might have teased him by saying ‘Eddie’s kettle has come to a boil!’. It doesn’t seem very appropriate to do that right now, “I need my in-inhaler. Oh shit, I left it in our room.”

“Shuh-shit,” Bill sounds from behind him, much closer than Richie had realized, “I’ll guh-go get i-i-it,” He pushes past them on the staircase.

“Hold on a second, Billy, I’ve got it right here,” Richie pulls out the little device from his pocket, pressing it against Eddie’s lips and releasing the trigger. As he inhales, his eyes are wide with surprise. It had been sitting on Eddie’s nightstand when he’d been leaving the room for the meeting, so he’d grabbed it without another thought. Eddie usually took it everywhere with him so he figured it was a mistake. It’s no big deal.

“Oh thank fuck, I thuh-thought he was guh-going to die,” Bill messes his hair up entirely with his hand in one swift motion.

“He’s not going to die, he’s too stubborn for that,” Richie grins at Eddie in an attempt to lighten the mood but Eddie is busy staring at the hole in his hand, “Let’s get you to the nurse, okay? Why don’t you wrap up everything here, Bill? I’ll handle this.”

“Sorry, Eddie,” Bill says meekly, turning back to everyone else in the room and asking them to help clean up.

Richie pulls Eddie up by his forearm and heads in the direction of the nurse’s office.

“Do I need to carry you, princess?” Richie tries to tease, frowning at the scowl he gets in return.

“I injured my *hand*, dipshit. And don’t call me princess, I don’t need anyone catching onto that and making fun of me again,” Eddie sighs.

Richie’s not sure if he means he was bullied in the past or now, at Saint Anthony’s, but he *will* kill Patrick if he finds out he’s been fucking with Eddie. It’s a question that can be asked later, though.

Eddie stares at the wound on his hand like it’s magically going to

grow bigger as time goes on.

“It’s going to be fine, I swear,” Eddie doesn’t move his eyes away from his hand and Richie huffs, “If it’s not, I will gladly die in your place.”

“That’s not how it works, dumbass,” Eddie snaps, glancing around to keep an eye out for any teachers or advisors who would scold him for his foul language.

“You could’ve just said ‘thanks’,” Richie rolls his eyes. Those pretty eyes finally meet his own with an apologetic look and Richie nearly *melts* instantaneously, “You did really great today, aside from the whole tripping and impaling yourself on a rusty nail thing.”

Eddie glances away, down at the sidewalk as it passes under their feet, “Bill was harder on me than I thought he was going to be. I felt like I was messing it all up, do you really think I was good?”

Richie sighs, “Bill was impressed, I could tell,” He nudges his elbow against Eddie’s arm, “I promise you did a good job,” He loops his pinky around Eddie’s and leaves it there- almost like they’re holding hands.

His heart pounds loudly in his chest once again. It isn’t plausible for hearts to beat loud enough that other people can hear them, right?

“Your opinion is the only one I can trust,” Eddie says like it’s a straightforward fact, and before Richie can think twice they’re walking into the cold, white walls of the nurse’s office.

Eddie pops up onto the little grey bed like he’s done it a million times before and Richie sits on the hard, plastic chair in the corner of the room.

The nurse is someone Richie’s seen a few times before with painful bruises from ‘falling down the stairs’. She’s nice enough, even went as far as to care enough to ask him if someone was hurting him- which he lied about, of course. Her name is Jessica Turney, but she lets everyone call her Nurse Jessie and she always gives Richie a lollipop that he’s always ridiculously enthusiastic about.

“Kaspbrak is your last name?” She says, pulling out a folder when Eddie nods, “Okay, so this is your first visit this year- *woah*, that is an extensive amount of information your parents provided for us.”

It’s a large folder stuffed with lots of papers that cause Eddie to duck his head shyly like he’s embarrassed.

“My mom is really overprotective, sorry,” He grumbles.

“It’s not a problem. The more information, the better,” She jots down the date and reason for his trip to the nurse, “Now let me see that sucker.”

She holds out her gloved hands and Eddie places his wounded one into them. The blood has dried up and the skin around it has turned a pink hue.

“That’s pretty rough, but I don’t think it needs stitches. I’ll clean it out, apply some antibiotic ointment and a bandaid, and call your mother to let her know what happened.”

“What?” Eddie all but squawks, “You can’t call her, she’ll... she’ll freak out,” Richie doesn’t know much about his mom other than Eddie doesn’t seem to like her very much, but he still feels suddenly very protective of him. He sits upright in the chair and shoots a hardened look in the nurse’s direction.

Jessica looks up at Eddie just as she begins cleaning his hand, “I’m sorry, Eddie. I always have to call parents for a visit like this. You fell on a rusty nail, there are liabilities that come with that.”

Eddie doesn’t say anything, only looks over at Richie anxiously. Richie wants to do something for him, anything at all, but he’s only a sixteen-year-old kid. It’s tempting to go head to head with Eddie’s mother, but what will that do?

He hears the whistle of Eddie’s throat once again and nearly pushes Jessica out of the way to give him his inhaler. She gives them a funny look, probably the same funny look Richie gave Eddie when he first saw him use his inhaler. He pushes himself up onto the bed beside Eddie and grips onto his uninjured hand.

“She won’t really make *that* big of a deal of this, will she?” Richie asks in a low voice once Jessica crosses the room to get the ointment and bandaid. He runs his thumb across Eddie’s knuckles in a subconsciously soothing gesture.

“You don’t understand how she is,” Eddie fiercely whispers back, “She could... she could pull me out of the school *completely*.”

Jessica returns as Richie stares with silently wide eyes. All because of a dumb rusty nail, he might never see Eddie again? Eddie, the best thing that has ever happened to him at this awful school, could just be whisked away?

A cold sweat breaks across his forehead as he tries to think of what to do, coming to the indisputable realization that there’s *nothing* he can do, all because he’s a teenager and Eddie’s mom is an adult, and the world trusts shitty adults more than it does good-hearted teenagers.

They both watch on silently as Jessica picks up the office phone and dials the number listed on Eddie’s sheet, introducing herself to Eddie’s mother sweetly. It’s clear the moment his mother starts to freak out over the phone because Jessica’s eyes widen and she repeatedly says *‘It’s not that serious, I promise it’s a very minor injury’*.

“She’s going to kill me, this is awful,” Eddie moans, turning to Richie with hopeless eyes. Richie does all he can do- puts his arm around Eddie’s shoulders and draws him in as the faint sound of his mom shouting at Jessica drones on in the background.

Sonia Kaspbrak shows up in under 20 minutes, coming into the Nurse’s office like a marathon runner, clutching the door frame and panting for breath. It’s evident that while she constantly frets over Eddie’s health, she looks after her own very little. Her stature adds to her intimidation, she’s pretty tall and with just one glare she sucks everything out of the room- including Eddie’s confidence. The second she’s there, his spine weakens a bit. He does a complete 180 from the usual Eddie Richie’s come to know and adore. He does nothing except listen to Sonia’s constant shouting, alternating between Eddie and Jessica, that Richie hardly hears- he’s busy listening to the quiet, somber ‘Yes, Ma’ and ‘I know, Ma’ that keeps flooding out of Eddie’s mouth automatically like he’s turned into an Eddie robot.

Richie knows in that moment that he *hates* Sonia Kaspbrak. For anyone to take the sweet, funny spitfire that is Eddie Kaspbrak and turn him into *this*, they have to be pure evil.

After nearly ten minutes of shouting Sonia finally leaves the room to sign him out at the front desk. Jessica is spitting out apologies left and right, but neither Richie nor Eddie hear her.

"I'll see you when you come back tomorrow night, okay?" Richie says in the sweetest voice he can muster. It's difficult for him to be anything but goofy and crude, but for Eddie, he'll do anything to make him feel better.

"What if she withdraws me from the school?" Eddie sounds on the verge of tears, clutching onto the inhaler that hasn't left Richie's hands and taking in a puff. Richie can't believe that Sonia would withdraw him over something as stupid as this, but it's clear from Eddie's face that it's a real possibility. Eddie's eyebrows draw together, suddenly looking much younger than he is, lower lip trembling in fear.

"Then I'll kidnap you, she doesn't look that hard to take down," Richie grins, pleased with the little giggle he earns from Eddie. There's a moment of silence, Eddie staring at Richie like he really thinks this is the last time they'll ever see each other. Richie's eyes drag over his button nose, his expressive eyes, the soft blue sweater he's wearing and how nice it makes him look. He pinches Eddie's cheek between his fingers teasingly, blinking confusedly when Eddie doesn't bat his hand away.

It takes him by surprise when Eddie reaches over and squeezes the life out of him with a wet snuffle. His fingers wiggle against Richie's back, pulling at his soft sweater fiercely, "If I never come back, just know you're my best friend, okay?"

The way his chest seizes up in response to that statement startles him. This boy who he thought wouldn't even consider him a *friend* a few weeks ago just told him he's his *best* friend. Richie hugs him back tightly, trying his best to emulate the passion in Eddie's hug. He thinks if he squeezes hard enough he might be able to communicate everything he's too afraid to say, "You're coming back, shut up," He

says, but he seriously doubts the truth of that statement.

Then, as though he was an angel sent from heaven and not a real person at all, Eddie disappears, being dragged out by the angry hands of Sonia Kaspbrak.

Richie spends the rest of the evening moping around his dorm once he knows Eddie has packed all of his stuff and there won't be any trace of Sonia in the room. He stays down the hall, guiltily eavesdropping on Eddie and Sonia as they pack up some of Eddie's stuff. There's not much to eavesdrop on, though, because it's just more of Sonia ranting about the dangers of rusty nails, teenage boys, and how she should have never sent him here in the first place. Eddie doesn't say much until she makes that last statement, to which he says that he loves Saint Anthony's and doesn't want to leave. They both fall quiet after that. Richie feels ashamed that he just stands by and listens to the constant stream of manipulation being thrown at Eddie and does nothing to protect him. But there really is nothing he can do. If he stood up for Eddie it would only make it worse. So he waits until they leave, and slips quietly in the room to observe the damage done.

He feels a little bit of relief when he discovers that not all of Eddie's stuff is gone, but he's still not sure that Sonia won't change her mind and come back to withdraw him from the school and pack up the rest of his stuff.

It's as lonely as it had been before when Eddie used to go home on the weekends, before his mother agreed to let him stay for film club. Back then, Richie and him were hardly friends, just acquaintances. Now that it's almost Thanksgiving, it's surprising to consider just how much has changed.

He sulks for a little while longer, listening to music on his walkman and trying to read more of the book Eddie got him from the library, before he decides to find a better way to entertain himself. He immediately heads for Stan's room, knocking at least seven times before entering the room.

"I told you to come in after you knocked the first time, dipshit," Stan glares over the edge of the book he's reading.

"I just wanted to make sure, I think I've had my fill of PDA for the rest of my life after what I saw you and Mikey doing," Richie smirks, wandering over to plop down on Stan's bed.

"What do you want? Go bother Eddie, I'm doing homework."

"Eddie's mom picked him up," Richie sighs.

"Why? Was he sick?" Stan sets the book down next to him, sitting up and crossing his legs as he does so.

"No, not really. He cut his hand on a nail and his mom freaked out and picked him up and now he might not be coming back," Richie knows he looks pathetically sad, but he can't help it.

"What?" Stan's eyebrows shoot up, "Just because of a cut?"

"She's fucking crazy, she treats him like he's Rapunzel or something," He huffs and slumps over, staring off into space. He thinks over the last thing Eddie said before he left the room- that Richie was his best friend, and he sort of wants to cry. He loves his other friends, but *fuck* he loves Eddie, and he can't lose him. He really *does* feel like the world is out to punish him, like he's done one huge, terrible act to bring a shit-ton of bad karma on himself.

"He'll come back, he's stubborn as shit," Stan says decidedly, picking up the textbook briefly before glancing over at Richie once more, "What's wrong?"

Richie tears his gaze away from the spot on the floor he was staring at. Stan looks back at him, curious and innocent, and Richie feels at peace. He loves Eddie, loves Bev, loves his other friends, but there's no one he can trust quite like how he can trust Stan. He fills his lungs with air, lips quivering as he speaks, "Stan, I think I love him," He whispers into the thin air, watching his sanity disappear with the words. Stan tugs at his arm with shaking, earnest fingers.

"No, you don't, Richie. Don't be stupid," Stan replies. He's trying desperately to catch Richie's eyes but Richie doesn't want to look at

him, he knows what he'll find if he does. He knows that there's a burning truth, a fear painted on Stan's features as clear as day. *A boy who likes boys is a dead boy.*

"I do, I do," Richie repeats, because he just wants one person in this world to know who he really is. Just *one*. He might grow up, live a long life in solitude, or perhaps he'll die like Charlie Howard, tossed into raging waters to drown. Either way, he doesn't want to die without one person knowing his secret: that he *does* love, and he loves *fiercely*, but he loves silently because the world has given him no other choice, "I love him, and I know I'll never get to tell him. Or if I do tell him it won't end well. Maybe he'll kill me or never talk to me again or maybe it'll be Hockstetter who will get his hands on me. But at least you know. At least someone knows. I just wanted one person to know."

Stan collapses, the tight grip he'd had on Richie's arm disintegrating into feather-light touches. He's no longer trying to force Richie to make eye contact, but instead is looking at something across the room. He turns his head to the side, considering something for a moment. The silence cuts into Richie like sharp glass.

"Mike didn't kill or hate me," He starts, gaze falling to his lap, "I was the one who told him, if you can believe that. I was just looking at him, listening to him talk about science homework and I just told him that I had a crush on him, like that," He snaps his fingers, eyes finally meeting Richie's, "I'm not encouraging you to do anything stupid, Richie, but it wouldn't be the first time a fucking miracle happened."

Richie blinks owlishly, "You think Eddie could like me back? The way Mike likes you?"

"Maybe. It's happened before, hasn't it?"

"But we- we don't get to have happy endings like that. We get fucking *murdered*, haven't you picked up a newspaper?" Richie feels like shouting, but he keeps his volume low.

"You have?" Stan snorts and moves his hand down to hold onto Richie's, "We deserve happy endings, too, Richie."

“That’d be one hell of a birthday present, Stanny,” Richie jokes, tired of the conversation at hand and tired of thinking there’d even be a *chance* that he could have a happy ending with *Eddie*, no less.

“Shut up,” Stan snips, rolling his eyes dramatically, “I mean it. I spent so long thinking people like me deserve to be punished. Do you know how close I was to taking my fate into my own hands?” He looks down at his wrists sorrowfully and Richie realizes what he’s implying. To think Stan would ever want to do that is... horrifying. He swallows bile building up in his throat at the thought, “But then Mike came along, and he made me happy, and he loved me *too*. You can’t tell me that’s an accident, that it wasn’t some miracle or a sign or something, that I was sent the perfect person to love at the perfect time.”

“So... Mike came along and suddenly everything was perfect? That sounds like a load of shit to me.”

“That *is* a load of shit, but it’s not what I’m saying. I still hate myself sometimes. I still have nightmares about my parents finding out, about our friends finding out. I still think I deserve to be punished for who I am. But I look over at Mike, and he’s amazing and kind and he loves *me*, and I think that nobody like him deserves to be punished. You don’t either, Richie,” He tames a few of Richie’s wild curls with his clammy palm, “Maybe we aren’t good people, but we are average people- average people who just want to love and be loved and I don’t think anyone or anything can say that’s a bad thing to want.”

Richie snuffles, nose running from tears he hadn’t even realized were welling up in his eyes, “But there’s always the chance that if we tell anyone they’ll hate us or want to hurt us. I can’t even talk to my parents about normal stuff like my first crush. I mean, not that I’d tell them even if it *was* a girl, but I want to have the fucking *option*.”

“You know, I’ve heard stories where parents were actually accepting of their gay kids,” Stan blinks, rubs at his eyes, “I don’t think my parents would be, and I’m not sure what your parents are like, but it’s not inevitable that they’ll hate you. If your parents really unconditionally love you, they might be happy for you.”

Richie considers this, turning the thought over in his head. His

relationship with his parents is a difficult one with a lot of unspoken pain and harbored anger. For years he's existed like a ghost in their home, feeling completely disconnected from them.

But he thinks of all the time he spent curled up in his moms lap, watching Sesame Street as she played with his hair. All the time he spent building forts with his dad and laughing until they fell asleep with Richie cuddled against his dads chest.

They did love him, something just went wrong somewhere along the line. And all these years he's felt like it was their fault, but maybe it was him, too. He never once told them how he felt or why he almost never came out of his room when he went home on holidays and over the summer.

Maybe now was the time to start talking.

Maggie is washing the dishes after her husband had left for the night shift when she hears a loud crash coming from her sons bedroom. It wouldn't have been the first time their home had been broken into, rather the third, but it *would* have been the first time someone broke in while she was in the home. There's a gun in her nightstand, but to get to that she'd have to walk past Richie's room, effectively giving her presence away. Hands shaking, she presses her waist against the kitchen counter, considering her next move.

"Mom?" A sweet, familiar voice calls out.

"Richard?" She calls back, laughing in surprise, "Richie, is that you, honey?"

Her son, taller than she remembered, rounds the corner into the kitchen with a small smile on his face. Sometimes when she sees him it feels like she's looking at him at two years old, eight years old, thirteen years old, and sixteen years old all at once. He looks like a mess with pieces of autumn leaves stuck in his hair, an ugly color block sweatshirt he'd begged her to get him for Christmas distracting from his messy hair.

“Mom,” He says, sheepishly waving at her, “Hi.”

“What are you doing home? Did you climb through the window?” She asks, drying her hands off with a dishtowel as he crosses over to the couch in the living room. Their home is tiny but open, so she can see him from her spot at the sink. He looks so grown, broad shoulders and lanky limbs. She misses when he was just a toddler and he would love to curl up in her lap like a cat. He was such a weird, imaginative child.

“I wanted to visit,” He answers with a shrug.

“I wish you would’ve told me, your father might have stayed home from work.”

“I thought you’d be at work so I assumed the door was locked,” He shrugs. She busies herself putting the dishes away, suddenly nervous with the state of their home. When Richie is home for holidays or the summer, she always makes sure to keep it cleaner than she does when he is in school, feeling incompetent when faced with being compared to the pristine hallways of a fancy boarding school. They fall into a comfortable, simultaneously uncomfortable, silence as the clatter of dishes echoes throughout the home.

She hears Richie take a deep breath in as though it is immensely difficult to do so, then he pushes it all out in one go.

He seems to be trying to say something, stuttering around words for a few moments before he quietly asks, “Do you really love me, Mom?” He says it so delicately the room hardly moves a hair for several moments after he says it. Maggie turns around, looks into his big, watery eyes, and squints. Her son is hard to figure out, kind of like her husband. Richie reminds her a lot of his father, actually, always joking and goofing off. He’s sweeter than her husband, though, and she supposes the hardness that Wentworth Tozier has comes with age. She doesn’t really want Richie to grow into that, though, she loves his kind heart and innocence. Went is hardened, tired and bored with life. It’s not his fault, though, it’s what happens when someone has to work every waking second to afford to live.

“Richie, why-” Her eyebrows draw together more when he makes no

move to turn it all into a joke, “Why would you ask something like that? Of course I love you. I love you so much.”

She moves across the room to her son who looks suddenly very crestfallen, sitting next to him on the couch.

He turns to look at her, “You sent me off to boarding school, Mom. I heard you tell Aunt Sherry that I was ‘too much to handle’. Why would you say that if you love me?”

Maggie nearly chokes when he reveals that, remembering the conversation with her sister clear as day. It was so stupid to say something like that within earshot of her son, but she never thought he would overhear it. It was her way of pushing her emotions away, of pretending like it was better to send Richie off to boarding school that keep him bundled up in her arms forever. He was such a bright little child. He was offered a scholarship for one of the best boarding schools on the east coast at only eight years old. They were poor, barely scraping enough money together to pay rent, and being able to send their child to an amazing private school felt like a miracle. What didn’t feel like a miracle was sending him away to a boarding school where she wouldn’t be able to watch over him and tuck him in at night and kiss him when he cried. When they dropped him off and went back home, both her and Went cried like *they* were children, sorely missing his bubbly, happy presence in their house.

There’s a stony expression on his face, like a wall built up preparing for rejection. A muscle in his jaw works, lips set in one straight line. But, when she doesn’t respond right away and flounders for words, Richie’s eyes surprisingly well up with tears. She hasn’t seen her son cry in nearly six years. He’s tough, that’s for sure, tough and always upbeat. Seeing him like this makes her feel like her heart is splitting in two.

“Oh, sweetheart, I am so sorry,” The words come tumbling out of her like a fountain. She reaches out, pulls her son close to her chest, “I never should have said that. You *are* a lot to handle, I’m not going to lie, but you’ve never been *too* much to handle. You are my *favorite* thing to handle. I love you so much, I’m sorry I ever made you doubt that.”

Typically when Richie is home, she never knows how to act around him. Spending nine months entirely disconnected puts a wedge in a relationship and makes interactions uncomfortable. But now Richie needs her, so she pushes his beautiful head of curls against her chest and squeezes the life out of him.

“Why don’t you ever pick me up on the weekends, then?” He snuffles, voice rumbling against her collarbones.

“You...” She trails off in shock, “You always called and said you were having a good time. I never thought you wanted to come home. Richie, I would have *loved* to have you home every weekend, and so would your father, you know? We just thought you were happy at school, baby.”

Richie presses even closer to her, and though he is quiet, she can tell he’s trying not to cry more. She really doesn’t understand, he always called those first few years and told her he had made a lot of friends and was happy staying at school.

“I was but... not anymore. I hate it so much. I hate everyone there—well, except for my new friends. I sat alone at lunch until I met them a few months ago,” His voice wavers, “I just kept telling you I was happy because I knew it made you happy.”

Maggie runs her fingers through his hair in the way she knew he always liked as a child, and it pains her to realize that she doesn’t know if it’s something he still likes now. She never meant for this to happen, for their family to splinter and grow apart to the point where they didn’t even *know* each other.

“I don’t want you to lie to me, honey. I want you to be able to tell me anything, even when you’re sad,” She gently combs through a knot in his hair, “I love you so much, I’m going to be better at showing you that, okay?”

Richie nods against her shoulder, finally pulling back to look her in the eyes. His are red and anxious. She pushes his glasses up to thumb the tears off of his face.

“Can I tell you something, then?” He whispers, as though he’s telling

her a big secret. She nods eagerly, placing the glasses back on the bridge of his nose and gripping onto his hands. Richie swallows and blinks, looks down at his hands then back up at her, "I'm gay."

Her heart stills in her chest. Her hands are still clutching onto his tightly, likely cutting off blood flow.

As Richie grew, she'd always pictured him falling in love, getting married, having children. Every time she'd pictured that it had always been with a woman, every single time.

Richie's hands tremble in hers. In a rush, she replaces all of those perfect, picturesque moments with some faceless boy, and she finds that she doesn't care one bit. If her son is happy, smiling, and *genuinely* in love with whoever he chooses to spend his life with, that's all she cares about.

What can she say, though, that communicates all of that? There just aren't enough words. Not now, with the lump in her throat choking anything that dares to make its way out of her mouth.

She pulls him in for another hug, much tighter and happier this time around. Richie releases a noise that sounds like a mix between a cry and a laugh, "Are you okay with that?" He shakes in her arms, sniffing, "You have to tell me, please."

"I'm so proud of you for being able to say that to me," She tells him, surprised at her own words, "I just want you to be happy. That's all I've ever wanted," She presses her lips against his cheek which is dimpling with an excited smile. *There's* the boy she knows and loves.

"I kind of expected you to go all *Terminator* on me," He huffs a laugh, pulling away from their hug. She wants to say 'Why would I ever do that?', but she knows the jokes her husband makes, she knows about the mistreatment of young gay men and women. Her heart aches for how scared he must have been.

"I'll be back," She says in the best impression she can muster of Arnold Schwarzenegger, removing herself from him to make a cup of tea.

“Do you have any of that cherry soda I like?” Richie asks as though nothing has changed. She nods, pulling a can out of the fridge that she always keeps there in hopes that he’ll come home.

Wentworth Tozier considers himself a good provider, given the circumstances. He works hard, both day shifts and night shifts most days, loves his wife dearly, and wants the best for his son. When he was only nineteen years old his high school sweetheart tearfully told him she was pregnant. Maggie was only eighteen herself, had just graduated and was terrified that he would leave her. He can’t say he blamed her for thinking that, considering he had a knack for bolting when the going had gotten tough in their relationship previously. This time, though, he was determined to give his kid a happy upbringing, and make Maggie as happy as possible- and until now, he thought he had done that properly.

When he comes home from his night shift, it’s very, very late, and he’s exhausted. So exhausted, he doesn’t notice the scuffed-up yellow converse at the door or the cans of empty cherry Cola his wife never drinks lying around the house. He doesn’t even notice his wife is awake until he’s changed into pajamas and is crawling under the covers.

“How was work, darling?” She says, startling him. He clutches his chest and presses his glasses back up his nose.

“I didn’t know you were awake,” He laughs, stopping when he sees that her face is glistening in the dim light pouring in from the window. He clicks on the bedside lamp, “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Richie’s home,” Maggie snuffles and reaches out for his hand. Went easily slips his own into her grasp, squeezing gently.

“Isn’t that a good thing? Don’t tell me he’s been expelled,” He huffs a laugh, but Maggie smacks his shoulder.

“Don’t joke about that, that’s terrible!” She’s smiling despite her

words, so he tugs her closer until her head is resting on his chest.

“Then what’s wrong, love?”

Maggie shakes her head, lets out a shuddering breath, “It’s a lot to explain, you’re too tired to deal with this.”

“Try me, Mags,” He responds, always one to stand up to a challenge, even at the recommendation of his wife to not do so. Maggie looks over at him, closes her eyes against more tears, and explains.

He listens intently as she explains everything Richie had told her that evening, how he thought they didn’t love him, how unhappy he was, and most surprisingly-

“He’s gay, Went,” Maggie looks up at him with wide, beautiful eyes that he’s come to love so much, and more tears spill out of them. He doesn’t know what to say, he’d never anticipated this. Richie had always made ridiculously crude jokes about women and spent nearly all of his time hanging out with the young girl down the street from them, Beverly. He’d never *seemed* gay.

But he is- at least, he says he is- and who is he to say he can’t be?

“Maggie, why are you crying about that? He’s still Richie- yeah, it’s a little unexpected, but we always said we would love him no matter what. That still applies now, for me, at least,” Maggie shakes her head once more, pulling her sweater up to wipe away her tears.

“That’s not it, of course I still love him. But-” She grabs his hand and squeezes tight, “Went, think about the things he grew up hearing us say. I love you, but the jokes you’ve made are... *offensive*. Think about how awful it must have been for him, hearing you make fun of ‘queers’.”

Something crumbles in his chest like a bowling ball dropping onto his ribcage. He sits there for a long time, thinking over all the things he’s said in front of Richie. None of them were supposed to be cruel, but he supposes that they were, whether he meant them to be or not. There were men he went to work with who were gay, and they were just normal people who were his friends. When it came down to it,

he'd made the jokes because he thought they were funny, not because he really hated those people. He had never thought those jokes would be overheard by someone who would be hurt by them and yet, he'd been *telling* them to someone who was silently hurting because of them.

He feels like he's going to be sick.

The conversation abruptly ends, both of them saying goodnight to one another, but Went doesn't sleep a wink. His stomach churns and he wishes he could somehow write this off as a mistake but it wasn't—it was a choice he made repeatedly.

He's fortunate that he doesn't have work the next morning, so that he has plenty of time to quietly slip into Richie's room and settle on the edge of the bed, brushing some of Richie's hair away from his eyes with gentle fingertips. He's wrapped up in a green sweatshirt that's a bit too small, reading 'St. Anthony's Boarding School' across the front. His curly hair that is unmistakably his mother's splays across the pillow like peacock feathers. With his mouth hanging open he lets out snores that his poor roommate must have to deal with every night.

Richie groggily stirs, turning his face into Went's hand before pushing it away, "Dad?" He croaks, voice thick with sleep.

"Mom told me you snuck in through the window," He chuckles at the thought, "You nearly gave her a heart attack, you know? You were lucky she wasn't in the bedroom with our gun, she might've gone all Jack Ryan on your ass."

Richie laughs a bit, too, and a surge of affection Went hadn't felt in a few months rushes into his heart, "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare her," Richie answers, sitting up in his bed.

"She'll be fine," Went brushes it off as Richie leans back against the headboard. He grabs his son's glasses from the bedside table and hands them to him, "She also told me about your talk last night."

"Oh..." Richie says, looking at him with big eyes, "What did she tell you?"

"The whole thing," Went admits. Richie looks down at his lap, attempting to hide any trace of emotion on his face. Went doesn't try to stop him, only pushes on through the conversation, "I'm not mad at you, if that's what you think. I love you very much, and something like this isn't going to stop that."

"But?" Richie implores, as though he thinks there's some sort of punishment coming for this. The thought makes that sick feeling come back.

"I'm so sorry if I ever made you feel like I would hate you for telling me this, or if you felt like you weren't normal or there was something wrong with you. I made stupid jokes and said terrible things about something I couldn't understand, because it was easier to do that than to try and understand it. You know how us Toziers are, we joke about anything and everything. But, that's no excuse, because I should have raised you to know you can be whoever you want to be- aside from a murderer or something- and that I would be happy for you no matter what. I am so proud of you, Richie. You're nearly top in your class, you have one of the biggest hearts I've ever seen, you're fucking *hilarious*, and you being gay changes none of that. I love you- period."

Richie's head finally lifts up from his lap, eyes blinking repeatedly to keep tears at bay, "I... I love you, too, Dad," He surges forward to wrap his arms around Went's shoulders, "It's been a weird couple of days," Richie admits, giggling when Went squeezes him so tight his ribs could break.

"Now can we watch Terminator 2 before you have to go back to school tonight? I've been saving it to watch with you."

"Dad, the sequels are almost never as good as the originals," Richie rolls his eyes.

"I think you're forgetting about *The Empire Strikes Back*, son," Went elbows him.

"Eh," Richie shrugs, "I think *A New Hope* is better."

Went gasps, clutching his chest, "No son of mine would ever say that!"

Who are you, you impostor?" They lunge into a wrestling game with each other, Richie erupting into a fit of laughter.

"I am your father," Richie says in a Darth Vader impression, putting Went into a headlock, neither of them noticing Maggie watching with tears in her eyes just down the hallway.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a chapter I'd really love to hear your feedback on so comment if you can! :)

ALSO- I know not everyone's coming out story is as amazing and sweet as this, so I hope it doesn't seem like a misrepresentation or overdramatization. I just really think Maggie and Went would love Richie dearly no matter what, whereas parents like Sonia probably wouldn't.

9. Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

“Hello? Mommy?” He answers.

“Mommy?” The caller snorts, “Dude, you’re sixteen. Why do you still call your mom ‘Mommy’?”

“Shut up,” Eddie answers, flushing red but smiling nonetheless. It’s Richie. Some insecure part of him had almost thought that Richie would have forgotten all about him by now, “How did you get my number?”

“I sweet-talked the nurse. No one can resist the Tozier charm, Eds.”

“What charm?” Eddie deadpans, observing the room around him as though his Mother has somehow managed to sneak in.

“You wound me, Spaghetti,” Richie says, then pauses for dramatic effect, “How’s prison?” He asks. Then, much more tentatively, “Are you coming back?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Despite the different POVs in the last chapter, this chapter feels so different than the previous chapters for some reason. It has a more fuzzy and soft vibe to it for some reason. I hope you feel the same, I love some good angst-infused fluff.

Eddie’s room has a twin bed clad with a crisp green comforter that looks like it’s been smoothed over and fluffed every day since he saw it last. There’s no posters of his favorite movies on the walls because his mother doesn’t want him to encourage him to ‘rot his brain’ with those ‘goofy stories’. It’s just a desk, a clean bed, and a nightstand.

It doesn’t feel like home. Not the way his dorm room does.

"I've made an appointment with the Doctor on Monday, Eddiebear," Sonia says, smiling at him sweetly as he collapses on the bed, "I've missed you."

"Missed you too, Mommy," Eddie says. He can feel his stomach churn as he does so. It's not true, he hadn't missed her a bit, and how fucked up is that? He should miss his Mom, shouldn't he? Doesn't that make him a terrible son?

"I want you to get some rest, okay? You need to heal up," Eddie resists the urge to roll his eyes at the thought of getting rest for a cut in his hand.

"Yes, Mommy."

There are so many questions he wants to ask, starting with 'When can I go back?', but he knows that the more he asks the tighter her grip gets. All he can do now is lay back and pretend to be focusing all his energy on resting up.

The days tick by- Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and then Thursday. Eddie caters to his Mother's wishes, 'resting' and eating well and drinking plenty of fluids. She keeps a close eye on him, worried that he'll spike a fever at any moment. All for a cut in his hand.

The only moments of peace he gets are when she has to leave for work. Then, he gets to meander around the house, work on homework or read books. Or, on this fine Thursday afternoon- he gets to answer a phone call.

He doesn't like to answer the phone when he's home alone because it's typically an Aunt who wants to talk for hours, or a church friend who would just *love* to hear about how school is going. But this caller is incredibly insistent. He ignores the first two calls, ringing for quite some time before hanging up and starting again. The third one, though, gets his attention. He begins to worry that maybe something has happened to his mother, so he rests his book on the couch next to him and walks towards the phone with chill in his veins.

"Hello? Mommy?" He answers.

"Mommy?" The caller snorts, *"Dude, you're sixteen. Why do you still call your mom 'Mommy'?"*

"Shut up," Eddie answers, flushing red but smiling nonetheless. It's Richie. Some insecure part of him had almost thought that Richie would have forgotten all about him by now, "How did you get my number?"

"I sweet-talked the nurse. No one can resist the Tozier charm, Eds."

"What charm?" Eddie deadpans, observing the room around him as though his Mother has somehow managed to sneak in.

"You wound me, Spaghetti," Richie says, then pauses for dramatic effect, *"How's prison?"* He asks. Then, much more tentatively, *"Are you coming back?"*

"I think so," Eddie says, though he's pretty certain. He doesn't want to jinx it, "It's awful, though. There's nothing to do here."

"Well, I promise nothing much has happened here except moping around," Richie jokes, but he sounds a little serious, too.

"Good, I wouldn't want you having too much fun without me," Eddie is so glad no one is around to see him smiling into the receiver like an idiot.

"I would never!" Richie giggles, giving Eddie a vision of him in the school hallway looking equally as idiotic as Eddie does, smiling into the receiver with that buck-toothed grin of his. Eddie pictures his glasses, slipping down his nose as he laughs, bug-eyes staring at the floor. His heart clenches at the thought.

"My mom is going to be home soon, so I have to go. But, uh, thanks for calling me. I really missed talking to you."

"Me too, Spaghetti," The phone crackles, like someone speaking nearby, *"Oh, hold on."*

The line goes quiet for a moment before a jumble of different voices saying *'We miss you, Eddie!'* comes through.

“Hey guys!” Eddie hardly recognizes his own voice, sounding more enthusiastic than he has in the last few days. His heart already feels lighter, “I miss you guys so much.”

“You’re gonna regret saying that when you see us again and we hug you to death,” Mike says through Richie saying, *“I get to hug you first, you hear me?”*

His mom returns home from work after the phone call and is so enthusiastic over how he seems to be feeling better that she decides he’s well enough to return to school the next day. He plays the game well, pretends to not want to leave his mom for just long enough before thanking her for allowing him to return to school, then he scurries off to his room to press his beaming face into his pillow.

As he’s sitting in his room watching the minutes on his analog clock tick by, imagining getting to see Richie again over and over in his head like he’s away at sea- not just home ‘sick’ for a few days, something raps against his first-floor window and he immediately thinks it must be a serial killer. Then, he thinks twice about it- *it’s five in the afternoon and most serial killers don’t knock*. Whoever is at the window can’t possibly see him from the corner of his room he’s standing in, anyway, so he juts his chin out and peers over to see the unexpected guest.

It’s Bev. Her short red hair flies around in the wind, her nose is bright pink from the cold air, she’s dressed in an obnoxious rainbow coat, and she’s grinning with that same ‘madman’ grin that Richie has.

“Bev, what the fuck?” He says eloquently, but she probably can’t even hear him through the window. He rushes to slide it open, reaching his hands out to pull her in.

“No, I can’t stay,” She pulls away from his reach and picks something up from the ground, “Richie told me you were bored and asked me to bring you this.”

She shoves a plastic baggie filled with comic books in his face. Eddie gasps in excitement and pulls them from her hands, “Richie sent you?” His eyes dart from the comic books to her enthused face, a smirk stretching across it as she digs a cigarette out of her pocket and

lights it.

“Mhm,” She winks, “He cares about you a lot, you know?”

“I know,” Eddie confirms, grinning at the bag in his grip, “Thank you so much, Bev.”

In a flash of color she whirls round and takes off through the yard, smoking her cigarette all the while. Eddie calls out as loudly as he can without alerting his mother, “Love you!”

She tosses a smile over her shoulder and brings her hands up over her head in the shape of a heart. Eddie thinks that image might forever be burned in his brain, the image of a love that can be found outside of his mother's searing grasp. A family built from scratch can be better than the one that's handed out at birth.

The next morning he wakes up feeling like he's floating on clouds. In all the cheesy teenage romcom movies, the girl is always beside herself with how in love she is. She's always sighing and blushing and smiling and Eddie never understood how anyone could like another human being that much. Perhaps he was just a late bloomer, because now he understands exactly how that girl feels.

Despite the painful knowledge that nothing will come of this-whatever *this* is- despite that, he still can't help the thrum in his chest at the thought that he gets to see Richie again after five days of limited contact. He wishes he didn't miss him so much, that he wasn't so ridiculously sappy that his heart is trying to beat out of his chest as his mother pulls up to the school.

But here he is, trying to force down a smile so his mother doesn't see his evident excitement while she checks him into the school during breakfast hour, helps him to his room with his bag, and presses a sloppy, wet kiss to his cheek as she goes to leave.

Breakfast must've ended moments before, because Richie rounds the doorway into their room and catches Eddie and his mother mid-

cheek-kiss.

Eddie winces. *Please don't say anything, please don't say anything.*

"Do I get one too, Mrs. K?" Richie is taller than his mother, so he leans down close to her with his cheek turned towards her lips.

His mother grimaces and steps back, "Who are you?"

"This is Richie," Eddie stammers over his words, stepping between his mom and Richie like a sort of physical barrier. He can practically *see* Richie fawning over how '*cute and tiny*' Eddie is, "My roommate. Remember? I told you about him."

"Oh," Sonia answers, squinting at Richie, "Keep an eye on my Eddie, would you? He's fragile. He just cut his hand this past weekend and nearly got an infection."

Eddie's cheeks burn with humiliation as Richie responds, "Oh, will do, Mrs. K. Eddie is in good hands with me around."

Sonia seems satisfied with that answer, hugging Eddie one last time before leaving to find her own way out of the school. Much to Eddie's surprise, Richie sticks his tongue out and flips off her retreating back.

"What was that for?" He asks through an amused smile.

"That is between me and your mother only, Eds. Now," He turns to Eddie with outstretched arms, "I believe I was promised a hug?"

"You weren't promised anything," Eddie grumbles in response, but shuffles close and wraps his arms tightly around Richie's torso anyway. He takes in a deep breath and feels Richie do the same, his shirt ruffling under the ear he's pressed against his chest. Something pinches in his gut at the realization that he feels happier and safer and more loved than he has in *days*, and *fuck*, he's never going back to the nurses office ever again.

"We can't stand here hugging all day, first period starts in a few minutes," Richie says, but he makes no move to pull away. His chin is now pressed against Eddie's head, arms squeezing around his shoulders like he won't ever let go.

“Get off me you octopus,” Eddie teases, squirming until he releases him from his grip.

“Sue me for missing you,” Richie tries to sound snarky but really just seems bashful, smiling at the ground with a pink tint on his cheeks. Eddie stares at that flush for so long his eyes nearly dry out. Why does *Richie* look like he’s the teenage girl in a romcom? “Get your bag, I’ll walk you to class.”

And just as quickly as it came, the moment is gone, replaced with the excitement of walking to class with his best friend.

Eddie doesn’t really know how he ended up here. Sure, he *knows*, but it all happened so fast.

It started with Richie at lunch announcing that he had to miss the next film club meeting because he was spending the weekend at his parents house. Bill had opened his mouth to complain, but immediately shut it when he saw the daggers Eddie was sending in his direction. Couldn’t he see how absolutely *overjoyed* Richie was that he was going home? They all made the choice to stay on campus over the weekend, but Richie didn’t. Up until now Richie’s parents never checked him out of school for the weekend, and Eddie wasn’t about to let Bill ruin it.

Then, after the last class of the day, Richie had rushed up to him all out of breath and sweaty from dashing across the campus and asked him to go with him to his parents house. He said they wouldn’t mind and they would *never* say a word to his mom. And then, he said something sort of funny. He said that he wanted Eddie to *meet* his parents.

Eddie had stumbled over his words to say ‘Yes, of course I’ll go with you!’ because... well, why would he want Eddie to meet his parents? The only time anyone wants somebody to meet their parents is when they’ve been dating for a long time and plan on things like marriage, houses, and kids.

Richie had snuck Eddie out through the gate while Maggie checked him out in the office and then smuggled him into the car like drugs, explaining to his mother through pants of breath that ‘No, Eddie’s mom really won’t mind him staying with us’ and ‘Yes, she totally knows that he’s coming with us’. Maggie Tozier, to her credit, did seem to know that neither of those things were true but she took off with him in the car anyway.

And that’s how Eddie found himself in Richie’s surprisingly neat bedroom, picking at the comforter on the bed absentmindedly as Richie retrieves cherry sodas and bags of snacks from the kitchen. The sun has long since set, now, the lamp on Richie’s bedside table and the light from the small TV illuminating the room. They’ve killed off the past few hours reading comics- Eddie returned the ones Bev delivered to him and thanked Richie profusely- but now Richie insists that they have to watch *A New Hope* as it was a sleepover tradition for him when he used to invite people over.

Eddie jumps when there’s a rattling at the door, watching it swing open to reveal a balding man with as vibrant and childlike of a grin as Richie’s.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” The man says, observing Eddie with a friendly but watchful eye. Eddie tries to look as polite and polished as possible despite just having snuck out of school hours ago, “Mags said Richie had a friend over and I just had to meet you. Your name is Eddie, right? I’m Went.”

He releases the door handle and closes the gap between the two of them. Eddie reaches a hand out to shake, immediately overwhelmed by Went hugging him like he’s an old friend of his.

“Nice to meet you,” Eddie says between a few nervous titters.

Went looks just as awkward as Eddie feels, like he doesn’t know how to talk to a teenage boy. Eddie scours the room for something to talk about, but Went beats him to it, “Oh no, is he making you watch *A New Hope*? *The Empire Strikes Back* is better, right?”

“I’ve, uh, actually never seen any of the movies, so I couldn’t tell you,” Eddie shrugs.

Went looks at him, utterly perplexed, "What kid hasn't seen *Star Wars*? Did you grow up under a rock, son?"

"My mom is really strict so... kind of?" Eddie tries to hide his embarrassment by looking down at the bedspread.

"Well, I guess you'll just have to marathon them while you're here, huh?" Went suggests, pulling the other two movies off of a shelf and setting them next to the television, "Don't tell Maggie, she wouldn't like me approving of teenage shenanigans."

Eddie makes a motion of zipping his lips just as Richie bursts through the door like a freight train, "Dad! What are you doing in here? Get out! Stop bothering my friend, *please*," He uses a bare foot to kick at his Dad's shin lightly.

"Yikes! I've been found out! Okay, okay, I'm going," Went grins, ruffles Richie's hair, and closes the door behind him on his way out.

"He wasn't bothering you for too long was he?" Richie tosses one armful of snacks in Eddie's direction, as well as a soda.

"He wasn't bothering me at all," Eddie answers honestly, popping open a bag of Fritos he never gets from the school cafeteria in fear that his mother will find out and tell him off for making unhealthy choices.

Richie puts the movie in and they arrange themselves on the bed. As if he's trying to see how hot Eddie's cheeks can get before he just keels over and dies, Richie throws an arm around his shoulders and pulls him to his side. Eddie lets it happen despite how much it makes him blush, because he's never going to argue with being this close to Richie *ever*.

They start off at a fair distance apart, only touching from their shoulders to toes, but as time goes on Richie's head somehow sleepily gravitates towards Eddie's chest, and Eddie- trying to act as normal as possible- bends his arm around the curve of Richie's spine and remains completely rigid.

He likes the movies, he really does, but a question is weighing

heavily on his mind and he doesn't know how to ask it. It comes out as: "I thought your parents didn't like you," Because apparently *that's* how you address that subject.

Richie, luckily, snorts out a laugh and doesn't move from his position, "Yeah, I... Last weekend I talked to them about it. They were really torn up about it. They said they never meant to make me feel that way."

Eddie looks towards the door, wanting to believe it but also feeling weirdly protective over the boy half-laying on his chest, "Good," He mumbles with a smile, "They seem really nice."

"It was stupid, I guess. I should have talked to them about it sooner. I made my mom cry, I think," He takes a long pause, and Eddie almost opens his mouth to speak once more, but Richie's voice sounds once more, much quieter and tentative, "I told them that I'm gay."

Eddie chokes on air. Holy *shit*. Gay? Richie's gay? As in, he likes boys? Like Eddie does? And *this* is how he's telling him- all bundled up in his arms, eyes glued to a screen in front of them.

Richie's breath rattles in his throat and he goes to pull away from Eddie, but Eddie holds him firmly in place, only allowing him to pull his head back a little bit to look at Eddie's face, "Does that... bother you?"

"No, fuck no. Of course not. I'm just... *surprised*," Eddie is truly amazed at how well he's able to form words right now, with this information blowing up his brain like party horns and Richie staring at him with those stupidly pretty, apprehensive eyes, "Rich, it doesn't bother me at all."

And fuck, he wants to say '*I am too*' so badly, but every time he tries to force it out a lump in his throat blocks him, like he'll burst into tears after he says the first syllable. But Richie busts out into this huge grin, eyes all shiny and freckled cheeks dimpling, and he realizes that this isn't his moment, anyway. This is Richie's moment, and maybe he'll tell him later, when he can say those words without shaking like a leaf, but for now he just watches as Richie says '*Okay, cool*', tucks his head back against Eddie's chest, and resumes

watching the movie as though nothing has changed at all.

Later, when Richie has lulled himself to sleep and Eddie is free to rub circles into the planes of his back as Darth Vader says '*Luke, I am your father*', Went opens the door to his shocked face.

"You should've seen Richie when he first saw that scene," Went whispers, chuckling to himself, "He freaked out. His eyes were as big as the fucking moon, I swear."

He seems to just notice at that moment that Richie is, in fact, fast asleep and snoring on Eddie's chest. He bends at the waist to see if Richie really is passed out, and nods to himself, "This is why he thinks *A New Hope* is better, because he can never stay awake long enough to watch this one."

"Before this he said we were going to pull an allnighter," Eddie laughs when Went's eyes crinkle into a smile.

"He talks a big game," Went snickers and Richie starts a bit at that, curling closer to Eddie. Eddie thinks he might pass out from the humiliation, especially with the way Went's face goes soft and he shuffles around awkwardly. Eddie just *knows* this moment is far too intimate to be explained away as 'just friends', "Why don't you go to sleep after this movie, kiddo? You guys can watch the rest tomorrow, okay? I'm being a responsible adult here, Mags would be proud."

Eddie nods, a well-timed yawn forcing its way out of his throat, "Thanks, goodnight Mr. Tozier."

Went laughs so loudly Eddie fears it might wake Richie, "If you're a friend of Richie's, you're family. Just call me Went."

The screen of the TV goes blue as he exits the room, lighting up Richie's features- which are now tilted towards him- with a blue-white tint that makes Eddie think of all the nights he's spent talking to him in the moonlight of their dorm room. His face is lax, now, rather than lit up with conversation. His eyebrows feather out so perfectly that Eddie reaches out to trace over them with bated breath. He thumbs over the soft hairs, down the slope of his nose, and hesitates just over the cupid's bow of his lips. He holds it there a

moment, deciding against it and instead wrapping his fingers around the arm splayed over his chest.

Three beats pass before he drops his head down, presses a firm kiss to his forehead, then returns to his previous position and squeezes his eyes shut like he can play it all off as though he was sleep-creeping if Richie wakes up.

Richie doesn't wake up, and Eddie falls asleep with a heart so full he thinks he might burst at the seams.

Notes for the Chapter:

If you see any grammatical errors let me know! I proofread this but I'm zoinked after rushing to finish all my homework (I procrastinated because I played Sims 4 University for too long oops)

EDIT: Also!!! 21 comments last chapter? What. The. Heck??? That made me feel so loved (also a little pressure for the next chapter to be just as good yikes) but seriously, thank you so much to everyone who commented. If I haven't gotten back to you yet, I definitely will be. Thank you for everything you guys said, I'm so happy to have written something that meant so much to so many people. Let's create more happy coming out stories, yeah? We deserve happy endings peeps!

Edit #2: I'm not sure if anyone will really see this, but I wanted to say that I'm planning on creating a fairly short Chapter 10 but posting Chapter 11 immediately after, so it might take a little longer than normal before I update. Sorry for the wait and thank you for reading!

10. Chapter 10

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie likes to imagine, sometimes, that he's bigger than Patrick Hockstetter, bigger than all the students, bigger than the boarding school itself. He's a giant, buttoned up in his white shirt and navy slacks, laying against the school like a person would against a toy house, arms spread out wide across the city like a martyr, bleeding from the mouth, from the nose, from the heart. He's bigger than it all, better than it all, smoking a cigarette and defiantly glaring up at the sun.

There's no one there, no one loud enough to tell him what to do or who to be. If he can't decide who he is yet, that's his own damn problem. He's invincible and fragile, immortal and delicate.

But down here— small, bleeding from the mouth and nose and heart all the same— he's mostly just fragile.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is very, very short (I promise it's not laziness, it's just how the story worked out) but fear not- I plan on posting the next chapter later tonight or early tomorrow! Let me know what you think, though! :)

Things were going well. Richie felt like his life was *perfect*. His parents knew he was gay and still loved him, loved him more than he had ever realized. Eddie and Stan knew he was gay and still loved him, and Patrick had been leaving him alone more than usual. Richie hung out with his friends every chance he could, especially when they all got together to watch Mike absolutely crush the other team playing football. The film club was going well, Richie was a surprisingly good cameraman — something he attributed to his Dad's love of movies. Eddie was still completely indifferent to or ignorant

of Richie's massive crush, and the two of them were more connected at the hip than they ever had been before. Christmas break had been a surprisingly difficult time, but Maggie helped him shop for a gift to give Eddie once it was over. He'd made a blanket fort with his Dad Christmas morning, helped his mom — to the best of his ability — make the Christmas ham. Everything in his life was disproportionately perfect. It only made sense for something to crack under all the weight.

Richie likes to imagine, sometimes, that he's bigger than Patrick Hockstetter, bigger than all the students, bigger than the boarding school itself. He's a giant, buttoned up in his white shirt and navy slacks, laying against the school like a person would against a toy house, arms spread out wide across the city like a martyr, bleeding from the mouth, from the nose, from the heart. He's bigger than it all, better than it all, smoking a cigarette and defiantly glaring up at the sun.

There's no one there, no one loud enough to tell him what to do or who to be. If he can't decide who he is yet, that's his own damn problem. He's invincible and fragile, immortal and delicate.

But down here — small, bleeding from the mouth and nose and heart all the same — he's mostly just fragile.

"Flush it," Patrick's new transfer friend, Belch, says. It's always amazed Richie how people like this, people with a hunger for other people's suffering, gravitate together no matter the circumstances.

Patrick leans forward, chest pressed against Richie's back, and flushes the toilet with Richie's head still in it. He keeps his lips sealed for as long as he can, but he's upside down and water is flushing into his nostrils, so he eventually starts to sputter and cough.

They keep at this for a while, roughing Richie up and shoving his head down in the toilet. It gets so bad that at one point he thinks he's going to pass out from holding his breath for so long. As stupid as it is, he doesn't think he's ever been as terrified as he is, watching the blood from his nose swirl around in the toilet water and thinking he might never breathe again. It couldn't possibly get worse, could it?

But then Patrick turns to Belch as he goes to leave and says, “Now let’s go find that other faggot friend of his.”

Richie vomits into the toilet instantaneously.

“Wait-” He says as he frantically uses toilet paper to wipe off his mouth, “I don’t — I don’t have any friends.”

It’s stupid and he knows it, but he hopes that it will distract Patrick from whoever he wants to go after next. He’s mostly worried about Stan and Mike, terrified that somehow Hockstetter knows about their relationship.

“Sure you do,” Patrick sneers, looking away from Belch and back at Richie. “The tiny one with the asthma.”

Fuck. Richie thinks, *Is my Achilles heel that obvious?*

Patrick goes to turn away, to find Eddie and throw him around just like he does to Richie, and Richie has to think very, very fast. His brain has never moved as quickly as his mouth, or his arms, in this case.

For the first time in his life, he throws a mean left hook right at Hockstetter’s ugly sneering face, watching as he stumbles and falls onto his ass. Then Belch, who is nearly twice as big as Richie, starts towards him. Richie ducks and pushes on his chest *hard*. With a tiny bit of luck, Belch’s feet get twisted up and he thuds to the floor with a little help from Richie’s forceful shove.

“What the *fuck*, Tozier?” Patrick shouts, completely unused to Richie fighting back in any form other than snarky, biting remarks.

“Don’t — Don’t fuck with him!” Richie cries. Never in his life has he felt hot all over like this, hands shaking with terror and rage. “Don’t you touch him, don’t talk to him, don’t even fucking breathe in his direction!”

Both of them have started to get up from the ground now. Richie panics and looks around, sees a lacrosse stick laying next to a duffle bag on the ground. He darts over to it, picks it up, and takes a swing at both of their ugly mugs.

Then, without another thought, he flees the room and wipes the blood from his own mouth and nose, shouting, "Help! Teacher! There's a couple of guys going after each other in there!"

He watches Mr. Bitters zoom by him to split up the fight, taking his chance to dash down the hall to his dorm room, chest heaving and heart pumping.

"Richie?" Eddie squawks the moment that Richie barrels through the door. He's reading one of Richie's comics they brought from his house, but he throws it onto the bed and stands up upon his dramatic entrance. "Richie, what happened?"

His eyes are so wide, hands outstretched like he's approaching a scared animal. He's watching him like he's looking at the most horrifying thing he's ever seen, like the war videos they watch in History class. He observes the remnants of blood on Richie's nose and mouth, his drenched hair and tense frame.

"Richie," Eddie tries again, sounding urgent and a little angry. "Was it Patrick again?" He reaches out further, going for Richie's shoulders, but all Richie can hear is *'Let's go find that other faggot friend of his'* and he wants to fucking vomit all over the floor, wants to take back every good thing that's ever happened between them, wants to push everything in this fucked up world away from him.

So he does.

"No," He says sharply when Eddie's hands grip onto his shoulders. They feel so warm and safe and it takes everything in him to push him off.

"Richie, what — " Eddie looks hurt, but his face softens like he's reminding himself that Richie's a wounded, helpless child. And Richie kind of wants to pretend that he is, for a moment, so he can be held by Eddie and feel *safe* again.

"Stop, I don't — I don't need — " He sputters around words, trying and failing to sound angry. It's not *fucking* working for some reason, Eddie's not bouncing back to his usual snippy self which tells Richie that he must look particularly pathetic right now. He scrambles

desperately, remembering nothing but Patrick's predatory smile as his lips curled around the words *'the tiny one with the asthma'*.

And somehow, without even really knowing *why* he knows it, he *knows* what would hurt Eddie the most, what would get Eddie to leave him alone for good so Patrick would never pick on him *ever*.

Eddie reaches out for him once more, going for his face this time — likely to check on his wounds, but Richie doesn't let him. He slaps his hand away with as much force as he can muster to use on someone he loves as much as Eddie, and he spits, "I'm not your fucking *boyfriend*, lay off."

There is nothing in this world more painful than the way Eddie pulls back, mouth forming around soundless stuttering. Richie feels his mouth twist up as he tries not to burst into tears right then and there. The seconds tick by as Eddie looks at him with genuine confusion and horror, morphing over time into outright anger.

"Fuck *that*," Is all Eddie says before storming out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The room is completely noiseless as Richie stares at the door, everything — his heartbeat, his breathing, his blinking — completely stopped. It's dead silent, not even the sound of other students moving down the hall flooding in from under the door.

He's alone.

After five amazing months, he is right back where he started: completely, entirely, utterly alone. And the worst part is that this time, he fucking deserves it.

11. Chapter 11

Summary for the Chapter:

This is something so much different than all the love he's been through before. This is the kind of love he would have thought he wasn't brave enough to feel. This is selfless, and Eddie knows now, more than ever before, that he will never be like his mother.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am equally parts happy and unhappy with this one. But, boy, am I excited for you all to read it! Two updates in one day, woohoo!

Christmas break came and went, and now it's nearing the end of January, which means that Eddie has known Richie for nearly five months. It's not a long time, not really enough to truly know somebody inside and out. But somehow, he thinks that he's pretty damn close. Richie hides from people constantly, terrified of... *something* (intimacy? vulnerability?) but Eddie has still managed to figure him out.

At the very least, somehow, without even really knowing *why* he knows it, he *knows* what would make Richie lash out at him that way.

"Bill." Eddie knows he looks insane, probably red in the face with anger, but he doesn't have the wherewithal to care right now. "Where can I find Patrick Hockstetter?"

Ben, who is standing next to Bill, raises his eyebrows. "Why are you trying to find *him*?"

"It doesn't matter," Eddie huffs.

"Huh-he's right ov-over there. I juh-just saw him guh-getting scolded by Mis-Mis-Mister Bitters a few minutes ag-ago." Bill points nervously towards the end of the hall, where a boy— more closely resembling a man— is leaning against the wall, entirely alone. "You shuh-shouldn't

mess with huh-him Eddie, he's dangerous." But it's too late, the air is already *whoosh-* ing around Bill's head as Eddie stalks away.

"Hey, fuckhead!" He shouts, in a tone of voice that he could have learned from none other than Sonia Kaspbrak, well aware of everyone turning to look at him. He's not an idiot, he knows how to make sure that there will be witnesses. "What the fuck did you do to him?"

"Ed-Eddie stuh-st-stop!" Bill has followed him for some ridiculous reason, meaning Ben must be right behind him. They all come to a stop right in front of Patrick, Eddie being by far the shortest and least threatening, if it weren't for the look on his face.

"What are you going to do?" Patrick asks, lips turning into a sneering smile that makes Eddie's skin burn with fury. How fucking *dare* he treat Richie the way he has and *loat* about it?

Eddie ignores the question, pointing a finger in his face. "Leave Richie the fuck alone, you-"

"What's going on?" Someone says from somewhere distant in the hall, and Eddie quickly realizes that it's Mike and Stan. Mike is walking over to them, looking bristled and ready to fight, unlike Eddie has ever seen him before. He is, surprisingly, *almost* afraid of him.

Mike has never appeared as a particularly intimidating individual, to Eddie. He is kind, a little on the shy side, and extremely intelligent. He is a nerd, a Loser through and through. However, Mike is a linebacker for the school's football team, tall and completely ripped. Right now, staring down Patrick with a sharp glare, Eddie suddenly realizes he's their best asset.

"He won't stop picking on Richie." It's a fact that they're all well aware of, but everyone had minded their own business before, because Richie asked them to. Eddie is fucking sick of minding his own business. "He came into the room with blood all over his face and I just *know* that this asshole-"

"Was it you?" Mike asks in a voice so chillingly steady he feels like

shivering. When Patrick does nothing but smile, Mike crowds into his space. “Do you think this is funny?”

Patrick doesn’t seem bothered in the slightest, at least, not externally. His lips appear warped, the glow of the hallway making his skin look sallow, resembling Palpatine in a sickening way. Eddie wants to tear his hair out from the frustration that Patrick doesn’t seem to be scared *at all*. That is, until another group of muscular, tall guys approaches them.

“Hanlon, is everything alright?” One of the boys asks. Eddie doesn’t recognize any of them, but both Mike and Stan seem to. One is wearing a Varsity jacket, meaning they’re all likely on the football team, too.

“No,” Mike answers, ending his eye contact with Patrick to explain the situation to his friends. “This guy has been picking on my friend and I’ve had enough.”

Hockstetter seems to finally find his voice, letting out a guffawing laugh, “What exactly do you plan on doing about it?” His words fall flat with his trembling voice. *Finally*, Eddie thinks, *he’s getting a taste of his own medicine*.

One of the other guys snorts at Patrick’s words. “What do you *think* we’re gonna do about it, man?”

“Remember what happened to Matthew Harrel last year?” Another guy asks. Eddie wishes he knew what they were talking about, but judging from the look on Patrick, Bill, and Ben’s face, it wasn’t anything good.

They stare at each other for a while, but it’s obvious that this thinly veiled threat has struck a nerve. A few moments pass before Patrick loses his poker face and he spits ‘*Fuck you guys!*’ as he urgently stalks down the hall.

Eddie profusely thanks Mike and the other guys there, but wastes no time in rushing back to his room. He thinks *he’s* owed some gratitude and apologies, though he knows Richie was only lashing out like a wounded animal. Still, what did *he* do to deserve being treated like

that? All he ever wanted to do was protect Richie. And now he has to give him a piece of his mind.

He bursts through their door, a speech quickly being written in his head, but every word of it dies the moment his eyes land on Richie's bed. Richie is curled around himself, arms covering his face from view, but Eddie can hear him sobbing without inhibition, he can see his shoulders trembling. It's then that he realizes he's never seen Richie cry, not once. He heard him cry, the first night, and it was the worst sound he ever heard. But he's never cried in front of Eddie like this. He's always been strong and unbothered, putting on a brave face for everyone else.

Perhaps it was foolish to think he'd loved Richie before. It feels like he'd barely known him then.

But now, as every illusion of the strong, confident boy tumbles down around him, he realizes he loves him now more than ever before.

And somehow that's worse.

When Eddie was six years old, two years after his Daddy died, he'd dawdled over to his Mother with a pressing question on his mind:

"Mommy, how did you know you loved Daddy? How do you know when you really love someone?" The question was so pressing because he'd been having suspicions, lately, about how he could love his mother even when she scared him so much.

"Well, darling," His Mother had said, all sweet and ready with her big speech, "When you love someone your tummy feels funny and your heart races."

Eddie, twisting his little head, pressed further, "But doesn't that just mean you're scared? You weren't scared of Daddy," How could she have been? For Eddie's entire memory, he had been a frail man in a hospital bed with a soft voice and kind words.

"Well, no Eddie. I wasn't. But I guess that's what it was like at first because I liked him so much I was nervous around him. After a while, when I really got to know him, I realized there was nothing to be

nervous about. He was just a man, a good man who loved me,” Something in her eyes was suddenly far away, fuzzy and distant, living in a memory, “I loved him even more, then.”

And then his mother was gone, disappeared into the haze of memories that already felt like they were a lifetime ago. As Eddie grew, the memories faded with the years, but never for his mother. They were something she must always endure.

It was hard for Eddie to picture his mother and father in a loving relationship, but it wasn't hard to picture the kind of love his father gave to his mother, the same love he gave to Eddie. It was the kind of love Eddie has always wanted to, but feared he was incapable of giving.

He loves this Richie more than the Richie that made him nervous, the Richie that took smoke breaks after classes and snuck out of campus, the Richie that told crude jokes and was unafraid of anything.

This is something so much different than all the love he's been through before. This is the kind of love he would have thought he wasn't brave enough to feel. This is *selfless*, and Eddie knows now, more than ever before, that he will never be like his mother.

“Richie,” He breathes, feeling like the words are bleeding out of his mouth. Richie's crying stops, trembling frame going completely rigid in the bed. Eddie waits for an answer.

Richie speaks, voice small and completely broken, and he only says one word, “*Eddie.*”

And then he bursts into sobs once more, never lifting his gaze up to meet Eddie's, arms still protectively wrapped around his face. It doesn't take much longer for Eddie to kick into action, lunging towards the bed and shoving Richie over to one side. He doesn't pause before crowding into Richie's space, wiggling his way under his arms so he can pull him into his own chest. He doesn't stop to worry over his soaking wet hair or bleeding face, he can take care of all of that later. Richie needs to be held right now.

“I'm so sorry,” He cries, crushing his face against Eddie's sternum.

“I’m so sorry, you didn’t deserve that. I didn’t want to hurt you. Patrick was— He—”

“I know, it’s okay,” Eddie soothes, having no real idea what to do other than hold him firmly to his chest, doing as much as he can to show him through his actions that he’s not upset and that he’s not going to leave this time. Richie clings to him, crying himself hoarse, eyes growing swollen. They might be there for hours, maybe only a few minutes, but it’s long enough for Richie to lull himself to sleep, sniffles slowing until he’s drooling onto Eddie’s shirt.

Eddie stays there, stroking his hair, brushing over every freckle and scar he can reach. He listens until Richie’s breath has truly evened out, no more sniffles or hiccups. Then, he pulls back and looks at him in his entirety, observes every bit of his humanness, the tear tracks on his cheeks and wrinkles in his uniform. He stares until his eyes grow tired with the fading light of the sunset, until the sun has completely dipped down over the horizon.

There’s no telling in what way Richie loves him, if it’s solely platonic or something bigger. But this, Eddie knows: He is just a boy, a good boy who loves fiercely, entirely, and selflessly. And he loves Eddie.

Eddie loves him back.

They, unsurprisingly, never talk about the events of that day. They don’t need to, they both know— something has changed, shifted in their relationship. Patrick leaves Richie alone, thanks to the entire football team keeping a very watchful eye on him. Richie hasn’t mentioned the sudden lack of bullying, but Eddie hasn’t mentioned where he ran off to after their spat. They’re back on their usual RichieandEddie shitshow.

The Valentine’s Dance is, apparently, a huge deal at St. Anthony’s Boarding School. It’s the only time of year, aside from Prom, that the boys get to see the girls on school grounds. There are a select few co-ed classes, but other than that, there isn’t much boy and girl interaction.

Eddie's heard whispers around the school of the rapidly approaching dance, but he hasn't had much interest in it. Eddie's idea of a good time is something much more laid back, less noisy and surrounded by people he didn't know or like. He'd like to take Richie, of course. He'd like to ask him out and dance with him in front of everybody to a slow song— like *Eddie, My Love*, which Richie always likes to sing or hum at night as they doze off because he knows it annoys him. Richie hasn't brought it up, though, so it wouldn't matter even if Eddie *could* muster the courage to ask him.

No one at the cafeteria table has mentioned it, either, so Eddie figured nobody was going. That is, until Richie brings it up as Eddie wanders into their room after classes.

"Are you going to the dance?" He asks, plain and simple, with a wide, teasing smile on his face. His physics homework is laid out on the desk in front of him. It's dark in the room, likely making it difficult to see, so Eddie flicks on the light as he passes by. "Thanks," Richie says and sticks the end of his pen into his mouth, chewing on it disgustingly.

"I don't know, maybe?" Eddie replies, tossing his bag onto the ground next to his bed and flopping down on the comforter. "Are you?"

Richie twirls around in the desk chair, looking down at the floor. "Well, I was thinking about sneaking Bev in, maybe." He shrugs, eyes meeting Eddie's. "I thought maybe you'd want to go... if I was going."

Eddie moves himself around on the bed, sitting up to look directly at Richie. "Bev's going?"

"Mhm." Richie nods. "She and Ben kind of have a thing, I guess. He's been meeting her over by the West gate and talking with her after school."

"Really? That's cute," Eddie answers.

"So? Will you go?" Richie waits a moment. When Eddie doesn't answer immediately, he continues. "It's always pretty cool, there will be lots of girls there and they play good music—"

"I'll go," Eddie cuts off his cute rambling with a big grin. Richie *wants* him to go. It's almost like he *asked* him to the dance. Not really, but it's close enough. It's as close as he thinks he'll get, anyway.

He feels like a teenager in a romcom once more as he falls asleep that night, involuntarily dreaming about kissing Richie during a slow dance.

The dance is in the gymnasium, and it is obnoxious, with streamers everywhere, several drunk teenagers (the source of alcohol has yet to be confiscated by the administrators), and music booming so loud that Eddie can't hear his own thoughts. Bev is there, though, and that's a bonus. She's been dancing with Ben all night, head resting on his shoulder as he tries and fails to find a place to comfortably and appropriately put his hands. It's all very endearing. Bill, Stan, and Mike all skipped out on the dance. Bill was miffed about being unable to find a date, and Stan and Mike, well... they didn't really seem to have a reason. In fact, when they were asked they both seemed to be up to no good, and Eddie wanted no part of it.

That being said, he isn't really enjoying himself here either. It is all a little much, between all the different sensations being thrown in his face. The most enjoyable part is the food table he's been standing by all night, watching Richie chat with some guys from the film club. Richie is still a bit over the moon with the fact that he has friends he can talk to at any given moment, and that extends to everyone else in the film club, also. It's very obvious in the way he talks, like he's always giddy to share how his day went.

But for some reason he always comes back to Eddie.

His eye catches Eddie's from across the room, glasses glinting in the lights. He smiles and waves. The long-sleeve button up, slacks, and adorable blue pattered bowtie he's chosen to wear have made Eddie's heart ache all night long. Blue is very much his color, just like the blue hue of the moon casting over his features as they talk to each other while they doze off. For a quirky teenage boy with giant eyeglasses and crooked teeth, Richie is incredibly beautiful. Eddie

would love to tell him that, but he can only *imagine* how much Richie would tease him in return.

He keeps his mouth shut and waves back. Richie excuses himself from his conversation instantly, using his stupidly long legs to get back to Eddie's side within seconds.

"Is something wrong, Eds?" He's close, hot breath flooding over the side of Eddie's face.

"Don't call me that," He snaps, then pulls back. "Sorry, I, uh— It's just a lot."

Richie's eyebrows pull together. "What is?"

"The, uh," He motions to the room as a whole, "The lights... the people and the music. Hard to focus, I guess." He shrugs, embarrassed that he's kind of being a killjoy right now.

Richie takes in the room, all the different noises and flashing lights. Someone bumps into Eddie as they pass by and he sighs in frustration. Richie frowns.

"Well, you're supposed to be having a good time—"

"*I know* I'm *supposed* to be having a good time, Richie," Eddie huffs.

"No, it's— I'm saying I *want* you to have a good time, so let's, uh," He uses his thumb and jerks in the direction of the double doors that lead to the West field. Eddie stares at the doors, then at Richie, then back at the doors.

"Yeah, okay."

Richie takes his hand and leads them both out into the cloak of the night, safe from the music and lights. It's much more beautiful out there, the air filled with the faint pulsing of the music inside and crickets chirping gently. A nearby streetlamp is the only source of light.

They stretch out across the bleachers together, a little uncomfortable but Eddie's stomach is squirming in excitement at the feel of Richie's

warmth next to him, seeping out from the fabric of his coat, reaching past the fabric of Eddie's to create goosebumps. They're pressed together, head to toe, Eddie's shiny loafers squeaking against Richie's worn out pair.

He watches the sky, dark blue and expansive, stretching so wide that it seems nothing else exists.

And for a moment, nothing does. It's just him and Richie, side by side, knuckles brushing against each other. For a moment Sonia Kaspbrak doesn't exist, nobody is there to tell him what's wrong and what's right. It's just him, Richie, and the sky.

A weight lifts off of his chest and he takes in a breath so startled that it alerts Richie that something might be wrong. Richie turns to look at him, grasps onto his hand out of instinct, and regards him with knitted eyebrows and a small frown.

For the first time, Eddie sees with perfect clarity that moments like these are one in a million, that when you hit adulthood this rebellion, this *magic* dissipates like everything else good and pure in adolescence. He sees, clear as day, clear as the sky, that there is nothing wrong with loving so strongly that every bone and muscle in his body aches with the need to say it.

When Richie moves close to stretch an arm out over Eddie's body in search of an inhaler he mistakenly assumed he needed, Eddie lifts up off the bleachers, nearly floating off into the sky, and presses his lips against Richie's.

Richie tastes like sour blue punch straws, smells like cigarettes, and kisses back like his life depends on it. He doesn't waste any time being confused, just fists a hand in Eddie's shirt and pulls him close.

It should be surprising to Eddie that he's kissing back. He should have expected him to push him away or maybe give him a black eye, but he never expected any of that. He just *knew* this was right, that this is how it was always meant to be.

Richie's right hand shakes as it travels up Eddie's body to cup his jaw, a thumb delicately stroking under his cheekbone. This is Eddie's

first kiss, but he knows a thing or two about kissing, and realizes that maybe he should be doing something with his hands. He moves his ice-cold fingers to press against the warm skin of Richie's neck, to thumb over his Adam's apple that bobs when they part only briefly to suck in a breath. He pushes down, over his collarbones and chest, under the coat to feel the warmth of the skin that stretches over his ribs, soaking through the thin white material of his shirt.

Richie pulls back and takes in a breath like a man who'd been drowning and Eddie just *knows* he's about to talk and ruin this. Eddie almost shuts him up by kissing him again, but he takes a moment to look at his expression and sees a vulnerability he's rarely seen in him since they met.

"Eddie—" He chokes, looking lost. Eddie links his fingers with his free hand and feels the tensing muscles relax a bit.

"I want this," He says, because Richie needs to *know*, "Do you?"

Richie blinks at him. Then, as if to test the waters, he leans down and presses another kiss against Eddie's lips. Eddie tries to tell him how so very *okay* he is with this, how much he *wants*.

"Holy fucking shit," Richie breathes. His smile is evident even if he's to close for Eddie to really see it. He can see the shine in Richie's eyes, the wrinkles at the corners, "All this time you've been pretending to be annoyed with me and you've actually wanted to *kiss* me."

"Wrong," Eddie scoffs, "I'm annoyed by you and I also want to kiss you, the two aren't mutually exclusive."

"Holy fucking shit," Richie repeats, "Eddie. Eddie Spaghetti," He sits back once more, giving Eddie a beautiful view of his beaming face that's struggling to be serious, "If this is some sort of sick joke or—"

"I *like* you. Really, *really* like you," Eddie says, blushing at the childish sound of the words but he's certainly not ready to drop the L-bomb yet.

Richie looks at him like he's mulling those words over, a mixture of

confusion and disbelief and childlike excitement on his face, “This is the best fucking week of my life,” He flops onto his back, smiling up at the sky like he can’t even help himself.

“Don’t get a big head, Tozier.”

“Too late.” Richie smiles. “Let’s go back to the dorm. I’m freezing my ass off and would really like to makeout with you somewhere warm.”

Eddie’s answering blush is something that Richie will tease him about for months, if not years.

Eddie, My Love plays inside the gymnasium as they toe tap their way down the sidewalk.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for 21 amazing comments last chapter! I am continually impressed and amazed with how much you guys like this story, it means so much to hear from you <3 thank you to anyone who has ever given me constructive criticism and been ridiculously kind about it. I handle criticism terribly, and not once has anyone ever made me feel bad for my mistakes during the process of this story. I’m just... incredibly thankful. Thank you

EDIE: Sorry for the random appearing blanket when they kiss... I got rid of it but it was there because I originally wrote that scene to take place during the daytime with... you guessed it- a blanket! <3

Author's Note:

Tell me all your ideas, speculations, thoughts, etc. I love to hear feedback!

My Tumblr is @cheekasprbrak also :)